

**AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND BECOMING GOOD: AN  
EXAMINATION OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND  
ETHICS IN PLATO, KANT, AND IRIS MURDOCH**

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## ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I examine the connection between aesthetic experience and morality. I specifically focus on the work of Plato, Kant, and Iris Murdoch, who all share the thesis that aesthetic experience has an ineluctable moral component, which enables it to play various roles in moral education and development. In chapter 1, I give an analysis of Plato's discussion of experiences of beauty via art in the *Republic*, and his arguments that art can be used in moral training. I also examine Plato's discussion of erotic experiences of beautiful people in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and his arguments that these sorts of experiences provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision: they lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. In Chapter 2, I give an analysis of Kant's discussion of beauty in nature and art, and his discussion of sublimity. I argue that, as a result of the different symbolic relationships that the beautiful and the sublime have with the moral, these kinds of experiences, each in a different way, are morally instructive.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine Iris Murdoch's view regarding the connection between moral progress and aesthetic experience. Drawing Plato's and Kant's theories together, Murdoch argues for her own theory of moral progress, which involves a pilgrimage that one must make from the self-focused fantasy life into which one is born to the apprehension of reality, particularly in its moral dimensions. I examine the way in which aesthetic experience is involved in the Murdochian moral pilgrimage and the connection between aesthetic experience and what Murdoch refers to as 'unselfing.'

In Chapter 5, I address the theoretical underpinnings of the relation between morality and aesthetics that I argue for. I present three interrelated theses, one in moral psychology, one in

normative value theory, and one in the intersection between them. The first thesis is motivational internalism about the good, and the second thesis is the substantive claim that the moral is, in fact, good. Therefore, when one understands the moral as good she has motivation towards it. However, humans do not necessarily have such an understanding. A person may believe that something is morally required without believing it to be good. Thus, the third thesis is that art may help us to see the moral as good by giving us a new kind of perspective: a new point of view from which one understands that there is a higher self.

I end the dissertation with a Coda, wherein I review the way in which aesthetic experience functions in Plato, Kant, and Murdoch. Then, I consider the main philosophical objections that arise against the thesis that aesthetic experience gives rise to moral transformation. Finally, I sketch a view of aesthetics in which I make some relevant distinctions that help clear up these difficulties.

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between aesthetics and morality is rich and manifold, and so are the works that are dedicated to discussing it. The main themes in this discussion include the question as to whether aesthetic experience may give rise to moral progress, questions about whether aesthetic experience can be used in moral education, the recent debate concerning whether or not aesthetic and ethical evaluations “go their separate ways,”<sup>1</sup> questions about whether the moral content of a work is relevant to its aesthetic value, and the question as to whether beauty is intrinsically connected with moral value.

In this dissertation, I examine these questions through an analysis of the view that aesthetic experience cannot, and should not be, divorced from morality. I specifically focus on the work of Plato, Kant, and Iris Murdoch. These three philosophies are individual and distinctive, and these philosophers’ views of aesthetics, in particular, are importantly divergent from one another in certain respects. However, they all recognize important connections between aesthetics and morality, and their theories overlap in certain ways. More specifically, these philosophers share the thesis that aesthetic experience has an ineluctable moral component, which enables it to play various roles in moral education and development.

My project comprises five chapters, followed by a Coda. In chapter 1, I argue that beauty plays two roles in Plato’s general theory of moral progress: (1) Some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; that is, these experiences can be used to promote the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia Muelder Eaton. *Merit, Aesthetic, and Ethical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

training that Plato suggests should take place during the beginning stages of education in the *Republic*. This is an affective kind of training, whereby a person learns to feel appropriately toward appropriate things. Experiences of beauty via art have the capacity to influence a person's character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. (2) An erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from (1) in that it adds a higher kind of cognitive component which is lacking in (1). In (1), cognition is involved (cognition is involved in all affection), but only as perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, erotic experiences of beautiful people promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

In Chapter 2, I give an analysis of Kant's discussion of beauty in nature and art, and his discussion of sublimity, which, I suggest, is surprisingly under-appreciated. I argue that, as a result of the different symbolic relationships that the beautiful and the sublime have with the moral, these kinds of experiences, each in a different way, are instructive: The beautiful is especially capable of teaching us to love something without interest, and it cultivates a certain kind of freedom from the merely personal inclinations on which we tend to focus. The sublime, on the other hand, best captures what Kant calls 'moral feeling,' and it teaches us moral dignity. Sublimity not only makes us aware of reason's power, but it teaches us that, in our practical lives, that power should be given due respect, and that it should never be defeated by our



inclinations. In this way, an experience of sublimity gives us, as it were, a revelation about reason, and we are carried to apply it to the practical.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine Iris Murdoch's view regarding the connection between moral progress and aesthetic experience. Drawing Plato's and Kant's theories together, Murdoch argues for her own theory of moral progress, which involves a pilgrimage that one must make from the self-focused fantasy life into which one is born to the apprehension of reality, particularly in its moral dimensions. This pilgrimage is possible only via the practice of what Murdoch calls 'unselfing.' In her view, certain kinds of aesthetic experiences facilitate unselfing; they train us to exercise what Murdoch refers to as 'loving attention,' which involves respecting something other than oneself. Aesthetic experiences, through the attitude that they command us to acquire, train us to respond and attend to things in the morally ideal way. The practice of attention, which aesthetic experience trains us to do, leads to the defeat of the ego and a moral transformation. That is to say, since moral training brings about the transformation of a person that is the aim of the Murdochian moral pilgrimage, moral training is the key to the moral pilgrimage, and aesthetic experience is the key to moral training.

Murdoch recognizes and discusses all of the following kinds of aesthetic experiences as experiences that may promote moral transformation: beauty in nature and art, erotic experiences of beautiful people, and sublimity in art (especially tragedy) and nature. She maintains that moral training, and the sort of reformation that results from Plato's erotic experiences of beautiful people, as well as the triumph over the ego, may all result from all or any of those kinds of experiences. Some of these experiences might be more apt than others to teach us about certain aspects of moral reformation. For example, an erotic experience of beauty might be especially capable of teaching us love for other people, insofar as it teaches us to appreciate the subjectivity

of another individual. Tragedy is, perhaps, especially capable of showing us the idea of death, which has a particularly powerful impact against the ego.

Like Plato, Murdoch distinguishes between good and bad art, and she argues that while bad art may lead to immoral action, good art may be used as an instrument in a person's moral development. Unlike Plato, however, Murdoch finds a place for erotic experiences of beauty, as well as sublimity, in art. Like Kant, Murdoch argues that there is a symbolic relationship between beauty and morality. However, while Kant and Murdoch both have specific theories of sublimity, Murdoch argues that an experience of sublimity does not give rise to the recognition of one's own faculty of reason, as Kant suggests, but rather to the recognition of other individuals, and the realization of human conflict.

In Chapter 5, I address the theoretical underpinnings of the relation between morality and aesthetics that I argue for. I present three interrelated theses, one in moral psychology, one in normative value theory, and one in the intersection between them. The first thesis is motivational internalism about the good, and the second thesis is the substantive claim that the moral is, in fact, good. Therefore, when one understands the moral as good she has motivation towards it. However, humans do not necessarily have such an understanding. A person may believe that something is morally required without believing it to be good. Thus, the third thesis is that art may help us to see the moral as good by giving us a new kind of perspective – a new point of view from which one understands that there is a higher self. First, I make some initial remarks about the nature of internalism and moral realism, and summarize Plato's, Kant's, and Murdoch's views of moral motivation in terms of contemporary views. Then, I sketch my own view that motivational judgment internalism can and does coexist with an objective Good, where goodness is not a function of one's desires. In the process of doing so, I clarify exactly what is

compelling about an account of moral motivation that draws on (as well as expands) the views of Plato, Kant, and Murdoch. In addition, I suggest some amendments to Murdoch's view.

I end the dissertation with a Coda, wherein I review the way in which aesthetic experience functions in Plato, Kant, and Murdoch. Then, I consider the main philosophical objections that arise against the thesis that aesthetic experience gives rise to moral transformation. Finally, I sketch a view of aesthetics in which I make some relevant distinctions that help clear up these difficulties.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **EXPERIENCES OF BEAUTY VIA ART AND EROTIC EXPERIENCES OF BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND ETHICS IN PLATO**

#### **I. PLATO AND THE SOCRATIC THESIS REGARDING MOTIVATION**

My goal in this chapter is to consider Plato's aesthetic theory and his conception of the role that aesthetic experience plays in moral reformation. First, however, it will be necessary to discuss Plato's moral psychology and, in particular, Plato's view of the way in which a person becomes motivated toward goodness. This will initially involve a discussion of the following famous passage at *Republic*, 505d-e:

In the case of just and beautiful things, many people are content with what are believed to be so, even if they aren't really so, and they act, acquire, and form their own beliefs on that basis. Nobody is satisfied to acquire things that are merely believed to be good, however, but everyone wants the things that really are good and disdains mere belief here... Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is

something but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs it has about other things, and so it misses the benefit, if any that even those other things may give.

“Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake” suggests that Plato holds at least a version of the Socratic thesis regarding motivation<sup>2</sup> – the thesis that agents are always motivated by what they believe to be most good. More specifically, in earlier dialogues, Socrates argues that people always do what they most desire, and they most desire what they believe is most good. Thus, they perform acts that they believe are most good. The crucial point is that all desires are for what a person believes to be most good, i.e. that *all* desires are for things qua good. Thus, for Socrates, *akrasia* is not possible – that is to say, it follows from his argument that a person will never do what she thinks will secure her less good than some other action she believes open to her.

However, in the *Republic*, Plato seems to describe cases in which agents act this way, and these cases seem to suggest that Plato accepts the possibility of *akrasia*. For example, though he recognizes the action as shameful and inappropriate, Leontius strongly desires to look at corpses (439e). His desire overcomes him and he engages in the action that he has determined is wrong (440a). Furthermore, according to Socrates, “we often see elsewhere, when his appetites are forcing a man to act contrary to reason, and he rails at himself with that within himself which is compelling him to do so” (440b).

Thus, making sense of the passage at 505d-e and its relationship with the examples of *akrasia* that Plato describes in the *Republic* has been a central topic in recent scholarship.<sup>3</sup> In the

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<sup>2</sup> See *Protagoras* 355b-d, *Gorgias* 467c-468d, and *Meno* 77c-78b

<sup>3</sup> G. Lesses, “Weakness, Reason, and the Divided Soul in Plato’s *Republic*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 4 (1987), G.R. Carone, “*Akrasia* in the *Republic*: Does Plato Change his Mind?” *Oxford Studies in Ancient*

*Republic*, unlike other dialogues, Plato introduces distinct parts of the soul, and this is what seems to make *akrasia* a possibility. Some commentators have insisted that Plato's argument for the tripartition of the soul entails that only the rational part of the soul desires the good. Scholars who argue in favor of this reading claim that the desires of the non-rational parts of the soul are 'good-independent.' Such desires in no way depend on apprehension of their objects as good. The idea is that these desires, since they have no concern for good, may come into conflict with our rational desires, which are directed toward the good. *Akrasia* takes place in instances in which desires come into conflict, when a person acts in accordance with non-rational desires instead of rational desires. On this reading, "every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake" is interpreted to mean that the rational part of the soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake, but the other two parts are not concerned with the good.<sup>4</sup> The appetite and spirit are thought to pursue objects not for the sake of the good, but for the sake of those objects themselves regardless of whether goodness is present in them or can be reached by obtaining them. Good-independence is, thus, inconsistent with the Socratic idea that all desires are for things qua good, so some good-independence theorists have argued that, at least in the *Republic*, Plato simply does not hold the Socratic thesis regarding motivation.

The argument at 437e that 'thirst itself' is for 'drink itself' is the passage to which good-independence theorists usually refer. Importantly, though, this seems to be the only passage that has been taken to support the key point that this view advances<sup>5</sup> – that, on Plato's view, at least

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*Philosophy*, 20 (2001) and Jessica Moss, "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 72, pgs. 503-535

<sup>4</sup> See M. Woods, "Plato's Division of the Soul," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 73 (1987) and C. Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *Reviews of Metaphysics*, 41 (1987). Furthermore, T. Irwin's *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford, 1977), and *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995) give an account of good-independence, but he does allow for the spirit to be good-dependent, in part.

<sup>5</sup> See Jessica Moss, "Appearances and Calculations: Plato's Division of The Soul," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 34 (2008).

some non-rational desires are not for things qua good. At 437e, Socrates explains that “each appetite itself is only for its natural object, while the appetite for something of a certain sort depends on additions.” Socrates explains that merely because “everyone has an appetite for good things,” this does not mean that a person has an appetite for a certain sort of drink, such as a hot or cold drink, or even good drink. Thus, this passage is thought to mean that the appetitive part of the soul, though it desires drink, does not desire drink qua good. The good-independence theorist argues that since Socrates says “thirst itself will never be for anything other than what it is in its nature to be for, namely, drink itself” (437e), Plato means to suggest that when the appetite desires drink its desire is independent of any recognition of drink as good.

Yet, this does not follow from a close reading of the text. The point that Socrates is making is that one’s desire for drink does not entail that it is a desire for ‘good drink’ or ‘hot drink’ or some other kind of drink. Having an appetite for a certain kind of drink “depends on additions.” That I am thirsty doesn’t require that I be thirsty for something hot or cold or, e.g., a good quality wine. It simply follows from “I’m thirsty” that I need a drink. In other words the adjectives only follow when “additions” are present, e.g. “I’m hot and I’m thirsty, so I need a cold drink.” Crucially though, we have no reason to believe that Socrates’ point here is incompatible with the claim that being thirsty – desiring a drink – involves regarding drink as a good thing. The very phenomenon of wanting to drink can naturally be construed as finding drinking good, in some sense of finding.

This shows at least one way in which good-independence produces an insufficient interpretation of a central passage in the text.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have recently argued that Plato does indeed consistently maintain in pre-*Republic* and post-*Republic* dialogues as well as in the

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<sup>6</sup> For another account of this, see Hendrick Lorenze, “The Argument for Tripartition,” *The Brute Within* pg. 30

*Republic* that all desire is for things qua good. This reading (which entails good-dependence, since it shows that the desires of lower parts of the soul as well as those of the rational part involve and depend on apprehensions of their objects as good) suggests that *Republic* 505d-e should be interpreted to mean that each part of the soul desires what it takes to be good and that everyone pursues things under the guise of the good, no matter which part of her soul rules her. Proponents of good-dependence argue, however, that only a rational-part-ruling soul can understand what goodness consists in, and that souls that are ruled by the lower parts err on account of confused notions of the good. According to the good-dependence theorist, it is this kind of confused notion of the good that gives rise to (and accounts for) the sorts of *akratic* actions that Plato describes in the *Republic*.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I shall argue in favor of good-dependence. Since my argument will entail the claim that Plato consistently holds that all desires are for things qua good – that every soul (and the whole soul) always pursues the good – I must begin with a discussion of Plato’s division of the soul.

Plato’s first description of the three parts of the soul – reason (*to logistikon*), spirit (*to thumoeides*), and appetite (*epithumetikon*) – comes in *Republic*, Book IV. As the famous motivational conflict argument for tripartition of the soul in Book IV unfolds, we learn that there are three activities of the soul: one part desires physical gratification, one part gets angry and loves honor, and one part desires actively learning.<sup>8</sup> The crucial question quickly becomes whether the whole soul is always responsible for motivating a person to act, or whether some part of the soul is responsible for each respective motivation:

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<sup>7</sup> See Glen Lesses, “Weakness, Reason, and The Divided Soul in Plato’s Republic,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 4, no. 2, 1987 for more discussion of the view that, in the *Republic*, Plato tries to reconcile his acceptance of the possibility of *akrasia* with a Socratic account of motivation. Also, see Jessica Moss, “Appearances and Calculations: Plato’s Division of the Soul,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, pp 35.

<sup>8</sup> These classes of motivation are explained thoroughly by Hendrik Lorenze in *The Brute Within*.

Do we do each of these things with the same part of ourselves, or do we do them with three different parts? Do we learn with one part, get angry with another, and with some third part desire the pleasures of food, drink, sex, and the others that are closely akin to them? Or do we act with the whole of our soul in each of these cases, when we set out after something? (436a)

Some evidence in support of the claim that each part of the soul involves a different sort of desire and is motivated by a different object comes at 581b: The rational part is motivated by its love for wisdom and learning, the spirited part is motivated by its love for honor (*kalon*) and victory (581b), and the appetite is said to desire money and profit (581a). “As there are three parts, there are also, it seems to me, three kinds of pleasure, one peculiar to each part, and so with desires” (580d).

At 439a, Socrates explains that since conflicting desires occur within the soul, such desires do not belong to the whole soul, but rather, to distinctive parts of it, which come into motivational conflict: It is “not to speak well” to say that the same thing desires something while being at the same time averse to that very thing. Here, the conflict between desire and aversion is analyzed through the ‘principle of opposites:’ The same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing, and at the same time (436b). Using the example of the archer, Socrates argues that it must be one thing in the soul that desires something and yet a different thing that is averse to it. (“To say of the archer that his hands at the same time push the bow away and draw it towards him is not to speak well. Rather, we ought to say that the one hand pushes it away and the other draws it towards him.”) Just as the archer’s arms pushing and pulling the bow should be interpreted as one arm pushing while the other arm is pulling, the analysis of desire and aversion in the soul should be interpreted as one part desiring and pulling, while a different part is averse and pulls the other way (439b). Thus, the point is that if some part of the soul is the bearer of some desire, it follows that, while that desire



can be attributed to the soul in a certain way (namely, it can be attributed to a respective part of it), it is not the *whole soul* that is the bearer of that particular desire (438b).

Certainly, we are told that the result of the differing motivations in the soul is a “civil war within the soul” (*tes psuches stasis*, 440e). Furthermore, one part of the soul is set apart from the others insofar as it has the capacity for calculation (*logismos*). This rational part of the soul’s desires arise from calculation (439d, 603, and 604d). The appetite is unreasoning, and non-rational (439d) and the spirited part gets angry without calculation (441c). Plato does describe the appetitive and spirited parts as having certain beliefs and as being able to be persuaded by argument (554d) and as having the ability to recognize a means to certain ends. This ability is characteristic of the appetite – the lover of money or profit.

Plato’s different descriptions of the object of appetite raise a problem. In reference to the object of appetite, scholars have used a variety of terms such as profit, gratification, pleasure, food, drink, or sex. The problem with calling pleasure the object of the appetitive part is that we are told that each part of the soul has a particular kind of pleasure – that is to say, pleasure is a motivation for the rational and spirited parts as well (580d). Thus, what is it that is specifically the object of appetite? I suggest that while appetite seeks food, drink, sex, and such sorts of physical gratification (these are its ultimate objects), it is also motivated by a sort of second-order desire (profit), which is a means to acquiring physical gratification, the end it ultimately seeks (580e). However, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the ultimate object of one’s appetitive desire might, over time, become primarily money. It is not unusual for a person – after she becomes accustomed to seeking money – to begin to desire the accumulation of wealth more strongly than she desires the objects of physical gratification that it can provide.

In any case, it seems that Plato assigns paradigmatic rational capacities to the lower parts of the soul when he describes them as having certain kinds of beliefs, having the capacity to be persuaded by arguments, and having the capacity to recognize means to certain ends. Therefore, some philosophers have argued that this contradicts his argument that the rational part is distinguished from the other two insofar as it has a capacity that they lack.<sup>9</sup> However, this alleged contradiction can be explained away by a closer examination of the text.

We have seen above that the famous motivational conflict argument in Book IV shows that the parts of the soul are responsible for different motivations because they are the subjects of psychological states (e.g. desire and aversion), and thus, the soul comprises distinct parts which bear motivation in various forms. In Book X, we encounter two other arguments for the tripartition of the soul. At 602c Socrates uses what is commonly called the ‘optical illusion argument’ to show that cognitive dissonance occurs within the soul: While the rational part uses calculation to determine the way things are and believes in accordance with it, the lower part believes things to be just as they appear.

The optical illusion argument thus relies on a distinction between the way things really are and the way they appear. The non-rational parts of the soul accept appearances, but the rational part – since it can calculate and reflect on the way things appear – can resist appearances when necessary. Socrates uses his description of an optical illusion in order to explain that visual images as well as imitative poetry “consort with” a lower part of the soul. This leads on to a further argument that is based on emotional conflict, where we are told that reason wants to follow calculation, but the unreasoning part leads a person toward “lamentation” (604d), “pity”

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<sup>9</sup> J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), T. Irwin, “Plato's Ethics,” pp. 282

(60b), lusts, and “appetitive pleasures and pains” (606d). This lower part is “thoughtless” (605b) and is “nurtured by tragedy” (606d).

I maintain that Socrates uses the optical illusion argument to illuminate what is going on in cases of emotional conflict. Specifically, the part of the soul that unreflectively accepts appearances and the part that leads us toward desires for emotion and appetitive desires is the same: It is the lower part of the soul, which includes appetite and spirit.<sup>10</sup> The passage at 603e (the emotional conflict argument in Book X) seems to correspond with the discussions in Book VI insofar as we still see a division – one that is made on the basis of the different motivations that drive each part – between the rational part of the soul and the lower, emotion and appetite-driven parts. However, the argument at 602c is a different kind of argument that is based on the *cognitive* conflict that occurs during the experience of optical illusions. Here, Socrates re-describes the parts of the soul with an emphasis not on their *motivational* but, rather, on their *cognitive* aspects. The emphasis on the cognitive aspects of the lower parts of the soul is crucial here because it shows that these parts of the soul are capable of performing not only affective roles but cognitive ones. These cognitive roles, however, are confined to perception-based thought, and perception has access merely to appearances.<sup>11</sup>

At 602d-603a Socrates uses the principle of opposites to show that one part of the soul believes in accordance with calculation and another inferior part of the soul believe in accordance with appearance (*phainomenon*). This illusion-believing part is the non-rational part,

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<sup>10</sup> Some philosophers maintain that the ‘optical illusion’ argument should not be read in connection with the ‘emotional conflict argument,’ and that these arguments are “embarrassments to be explained away.” However, a genuine reading of the text shows that – when considered in connection – these arguments are a key to Plato’s Division of the soul. See Jessica Moss’s “Appearances and Calculations: Plato’s Division of the Soul,” pg. 36, in particular.

<sup>11</sup> See Jessica Moss, “Appearances and Calculations: Plato’s Division of the Soul” for a detailed account of this point.

the appetite and spirit: At 605b-c, he connects the optical illusion argument with the imitative poet, who appeals to the part of the soul that believes a person at a distance is smaller than when he is closer. The idea is that images, visual or poetic, appeal to the same part of the soul:

The imitative poet...by making images far removed from the truth, gratifies the part of the soul that is thoughtless and doesn't distinguish greater things from less, but thinks that the same things are at one time large and another time small (605bc).

Here, Socrates uses the point that “the same magnitude viewed from nearby and from afar does not appear equal to us” (602c) to shed light on which part of the soul grasps the appearance that is given by imitative poetry. The imitative poet appeals to the same part of the soul that believes that a person who is standing at a distance is in fact smaller than he was when he was standing nearby (605b). Indeed, the imitative poet produces appearances that are perceived in a way that is analogous to the perception of an optical illusion.

Furthermore, it is the non-rational (lower) part of the soul (appetite and spirit)<sup>12</sup> that is the part of the soul that engages in perception – in fact, it is confined to perceptual appearances. We see evidence of this in the lowest section of the Divided Line, where the perceptible world is only a shadow and image of the Forms. On this level, one is confined to perception, and thus images. Perception never captures the truth in a full sense because reality/being/truth is imperceptible. Everything that we perceive, for Plato, is an appearance of reality – a shadow of a Form. The opinable is to the knowable as the perceptible is to the intelligible, and what we perceive and believe to be real is merely a shadow of the truth. Perception, following this same line of thought, takes place in the cave, whereas calculating (reason) is the key to getting out of the cave, as it were. Of course, not all perception is illusory in the same sense in which the

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<sup>12</sup> For a thorough argument that the lower part of the soul is identical to the sometimes called ‘emotional part of the soul,’ which comprises appetite and spirit, see Moss, “Appearances and Calculations: Plato’s Division of the Soul.”

submerged stick appears bent, but no perception gets beyond appearances to the point of grasping being or reality, which is imperceptible – the truth transcends perception. So, for Plato, perception takes place in the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul, which are motivated by *alogiston* whose motivations are never formed through calculation. The rational part of the soul, on the other hand, transcends perception through calculation (*logismos*). (At 523a, Socrates uses the famous finger passage to show that when contradictions bring the limits of perception to our attention, the soul summons *logismos* and understanding (524b) and searches for truth on the intelligible realm.)

There is a third argument for parts of the soul in Book X, which makes clear why Plato uses *alogiston* in reference to both inferior cognition and inferior passions/emotions. The third argument entails that the lower parts of the soul not only accept ordinary sensory appearances, but they accept unreflective/uncalculating appearances of good/bad. They perceive (and accept) evaluative appearances. In the case of imitative poetry, tragedy reinforces the acceptance of value by presenting images of it. It produces copies of things that “appear to be fine to the many” (602b). Something that appears to have value in this way is analogous to the way in which the stick at 602c appears bent. This is the “seeming good condition” at 464a which is something that develops early on in a person. The *logistikos* develops later, and takes appearances into account only insofar as they are material for calculating the truth.

A close examination of these arguments shows that the very same susceptibility to appearances explains both our perception of optical illusions and our appetites for pleasure: We see merely an appearance of the good (but accept it as a true appearance even if it is not true, and hence desire it) when we grasp it through the appetitive part of the soul, and this is analogous to seeing the optical illusion and thinking it is real. Jessica Moss explains this point well:

On Plato's view, in matters of value as in general, what genuinely is does not appear (is not manifest, obvious, accessible without abstruse calculation), while what appears to most people is not what is real and true. Apparent value is an inferior, deficient, shadowy copy of true value, just as (for example) perceptible equality is an inferior, deficient, shadowy copy of the Equal itself (*Phaedo* 74de).<sup>13</sup>

The insight here is that if the passions of the lower parts of the soul are appearance-based, they are incapable of reaching the truth about the good just as sight is incapable of reaching the truth about the form of the Equal. So, thinking that "the stick is bent" or that "drinking 'more than four pints' of wine is good" are both false appearances that the lower part of the soul accepts as true. The difference is just that in the latter case the appearance is evaluative. Not all sense perception involves illusions, and analogously, not all passions of the lower parts of the soul are vicious. While not all of them lead people astray, the point is that none of them can get past appearances of the truth. Only reason can do this. Thus, the lower parts of the soul grasp mere images/appearances, whereas the rational part can calculate, and so it desires what is best overall.

So the difference between the rational vs. non-rational parts of the soul is that the non-rational part accepts appearances unreflectively and the rational part – in its ability to calculate and reflect on appearances – transcends them. That is to say, the rational part transcends perception through calculation. When contradictions bring the limits of perception to our attention, the soul summons calculation and understanding (523a, 524b) and searches for truth. The consequence of the appetite and spirited parts being cognitively limited to perception is that the appearances they accept (whether evaluative or visual) will be false at worse and reflective of – but removed from – the truth, at best. This makes them cognitively and ethically handicapped.

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<sup>13</sup> Moss, pg. 63

As a result they pursue the worthless or the bad in the worst case scenario, or in the best case, while they cannot perceive it, they can be trained to track the higher value that reason calculates as good.

Therefore, we have reason to believe that, for Plato, evaluative illusions are grasped in the same way that optical illusions are, by the same parts of the soul. This means that while the objects of the lower parts of the soul may not always be good things, this does not necessarily mean that the motivations are independent of the good. Seeking the good but reaching only an appearance of it gives rise to desires for things that only appear but are not good. Hence, it is possible to pursue the good and, at the same, time be motivated toward bad things.

It is, therefore, unreasonable to suggest that Plato is inconsistent or has changed his mind at a certain point in his philosophy simply because he argues at one point in the *Republic* that all parts of the soul pursue the good and at other times in the *Republic* that the lower parts of the soul sometimes pursue vicious things. The above interpretation shows that this is sometimes the case because the lower parts of the soul are merely pursuing what appears to them to be good. While all three parts of the soul always pursue the good, only the rational part of the soul can grasp what is truly good as opposed to that which merely appears to be good.

This reading of the motivational characters of the three parts of the soul gives us reason to believe that all three parts are motivated toward the good in different ways, but the lower parts – since they are confined to perception and can potentially be confused about the good – may fail to pursue the *real* good. It is not inconsistent with this to suggest that all parts of the soul desire the good; the lower parts sometimes act on confused notions of it. When the lower parts dominate the rational part (when they are strong enough to overcome one's reasoned view of

what is good overall) they prompt a person to act against what reason has calculated as good. It is not that these parts of the soul do not desire the good or are not concerned with it. Rather, it is that they desire it but they sometimes mistake false appearances of good for true ones and, hence, pursue the wrong objects. It is this point that reconciles Plato's acceptance of the possibility of *akrasia* with a Socratic account of motivation.

Each part of the soul has a way of grasping the good, and all are versions of motivations toward it: the appetite grasps objects of physical gratification insofar as they are appearances of goodness, the spirited part grasps honorable things insofar as they are appearances of goodness, and the rational part grasps the good itself. Since the whole soul always seeks things qua good, but the lower parts can be mistaken about the good, and hence, mistakenly pursue bad things, it would make sense for education, on Plato's view, to be aimed at training the soul to avoid mistaking appearances of goodness for the real good.

The three parts of the soul play different roles, grasp different things, and are developed at different times (441a). It is important to present the lower parts of the soul with goodness that they can grasp early on so that they do not, by merely experiencing appearances of goodness and becoming devoted to them due to the immediate gratification that they give, miss out on the potential to grasp a higher good. Thus, the beginning stages of recognition of the good will occur within the lower parts of the soul, and if one wants to appeal to these parts of the soul, it must be done through an appropriate medium – one that is perception-based.

This, I shall argue, is the thought behind the conversation that takes place in Books II and III of the *Republic*, where proper education of the guardians is discussed. If the guardians are full of spirit right from birth, but reason comes later, their education must first involve things that



appeal to the spirited part of the soul. Pleasant things appeal to the appetite and beautiful things appeal to the spirited part of the soul – they are *kalon*, and they motivate the attraction to noble and honorable things (442). Thus, education will begin with music and poetry, and indeed, “the start of someone’s education determines what follows” (425c). I undertake this argument in the next section.

## II. EXPERIENCES OF BEAUTY VIA ART IN THE *REPUBLIC*

I have argued that, for Plato, grasping goodness is something that begins in the lower parts of the soul; that is, it begins in the parts of the soul that are limited to perception. As the discussion of appropriate education unfolds in Books II and III of the *Republic*, we see that it begins with proper exposure to media that is perception-based, e.g. music or poetry. As was evidenced by my arguments in the last section, moral education can only come to full fruition if an agent becomes able to distinguish what she has grasped through appetite and spirit from a higher good that is only understood by reason. Since, in terms of being motivated toward the good, the best case scenario for the lower parts of the soul is that they should be trained to track the higher value that reason calculates as good, it would seem that this training is the goal of the aesthetic education that is described in Books II and III of the *Republic*. In this section, I shall argue that this is, in fact, Plato’s view. In particular, I shall argue that it is the perception-based nature of music and poetry that gives them an important role in training the soul to become good. This section will involve a discussion of both, *Republic*, Books II and III and *Republic*, Book X. Book X has seemed to pose a *prima facie* problem for the theory of poetry that is given in Books II and III. However, I shall argue that the discussions in Books II and III are consistent with the discussion in Book X. In other words, I shall argue that the conflict is only apparent.

At *Republic* 401d, Socrates explains that all artists must represent good characters in their work. They must pursue “what is fine and graceful” so that something of their works will strike the eyes and ears of the young people “like a breeze that brings health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason” (401d). Socrates explains that education in music and poetry is most important because “rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace, so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry, it makes him graceful, but if not, then the opposite” (402). A person who is properly equipped with an education in music and poetry will be trained to detect and accurately respond to discipline and order, and that person must acquire the right tastes so that he will learn to like and dislike what he ought – to “praise fine things, be pleased by them, receive them into his soul, and, being nurtured by them become fine and good” (402). I am specifically interested in these passages, and I shall analyze them in what follows. I begin with an examination of Plato’s critique of poetry in *Republic*, Books II and III.

It is important to note that poetry was known by the sophists as something that puts its listener “in the power of another” where “the speaker controls the listener not by any insights that he has, but by the language that bears his message.”<sup>14</sup> The sophists thought of language not as an instrument of learning, but as one of persuasion. They criticized poetry as something which incites excessive affections, fear, and pity in those who experience it, and instead turned to the use of prose in a version of the dialectical method. Yet, they attempted to capture the persuasive and emotive power of poetry in their prose.

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Asmis, “Plato and Poetic Creativity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, pg. 341

In response to the sophists' use of poetry, Plato made it an instrument of moral education. In Plato's view, poetry is "especially effective because it can make a person assume the identity of another."<sup>15</sup> This imitative aspect of poetry, however, is something that may be used to either benefit or harm the soul. In Book II of the *Republic*, we see that the "city of pigs" is less than ideal, due to the influence of image-makers or imitators, and thus, Socrates purges this city. In the same way, poetry, which also involves imitation, will need to be purged.

In Plato's view, poetry is something that both expresses and shapes character: Socrates explains that a person's character is expressed through his words and actions; words, harmony, grace, and rhythm follow from character (400e), and a person's nature gives rise to his style of speaking and acting (397c, 398b). Thus, if a person's soul has good character, it will be expressed in his speech and action. The words we choose when we are speaking for ourselves express the character that we already have (400d). Seemingly, then, there is progression from character to the content of the speech to the words that are recited. The character is expressed by the content and the content is expressed by the words. Furthermore, confrontation with, or enacting (which involves imitation) the words of other characters can have the effect of re-shaping the actor's already existing character (393c, 395d).

When a person imitates the words and actions of other characters while performing poetry, her soul is re-shaped as a result of the tendency that she has to embrace the nature of the character that she imitates. While one is speaking as if she were the speaking character, a person tends to form in her own soul the character that she is imitating. In this case, the aforementioned progression seems to work backwards: The words a person uses in imitating the character give rise to her taking in the content that the words express, and then – as a result – forming the character that is expressed by that content.

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<sup>15</sup> Asmis, pg. 348

Some poetry misrepresents what is ethically appropriate, and when a person performs this kind of poetry, since imitation has the capacity to move and change a person, it can cause her to embrace the wrong kind of behavior. Thus, according to Plato, poetry has ethical implications. This is the reason that Plato argues in favor of the censorship of poetry: If poetry comprises bad content and expresses bad characters, since the listeners and actors tend to develop in their own souls the characters in the poem, exposing the guardians to bad poetry is a recipe for the development of bad guardians.<sup>16</sup> So, during the education of the guardians, they “are to perform poetry...[but] only that of good characters” (396c-e & 397d).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, those who experience poetry as listeners tend to imitate the characters in the poems. Poetry plays to the emotions of the listener and the listener is thus attracted to becoming like the characters expressed in the poems. We imitate because it is impossible to “consort with things [we] admire without imitating them” (500c). We imitate that which brings about a state of wonder or admiration in us. It is important, then, to be sure that those whom one is educating are able to experience things that allow them to feel wonder at (and thus imitate) “what is ordered and divine” so that they will become “as divine and ordered as a human being can” (500d). In this way, when poetry expresses good characters, the way in which it appeals to the lower parts of the soul can be used in education. Since poetry is a perception-based medium through which the lower parts of the soul can grasp good character, it can be used as a means to introducing good things to a person who is in the beginning stages of moral education.

Socrates also emphasizes the role of music in moral education. It has the capacity to familiarize a person with good character by expressing a kind of content of good character that

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<sup>16</sup> I deal with this issue at length below.

<sup>17</sup> We are reminded, here, of Aristotle’s discussion of this same duality for habit, considered as a tool for forming virtues. Our present habits reflect our already-formed moral character, yet it is by developing new habits that we are able to change our characters.

the emotions can grasp. During the discussion concerning appropriate styles of songs and music (398c), Socrates draws attention to two kinds of harmonic modes – the modes of a self-disciplined (or temperate) and courageous life. He explains that these two modes are the ones which will “best imitate the voices of those who are moderate and courageous, whether in good fortune or bad” (399c).<sup>18</sup> First, there is the mode which “would suitably imitate the tone and rhythm of a courageous person” who, in all circumstances, “is fighting off his fate steadily and with self-control” (399b). Second, there is the mode of “someone engaged in a peaceful, unforced, voluntary action, persuading someone or asking a favor of a god in prayer or of a human being through teaching”...or “of someone submitting to the supplications of another who is teaching him and trying to get him to change his mind, and who, in all these circumstances, is acting with moderation and self-control, not with arrogance but with understanding, and is content with the outcome” (399bc).

An individual who experiences the modes of music that most fittingly imitate the temperate or courageous person will perceive temperance and courage through a medium that reaches the lower parts of the soul. Since temperance and courage are part of a good character, it follows that music of this sort expresses a kind of content of good character. Music, then, presents this good content in a way that reaches lower parts of the soul insofar as they are perception-based. That is to say, the imitative character of music presents an appearance of goodness that the lower parts of the soul can perceive.

In Plato’s discussions of music, it seems that a progression (analogous to the one that we have seen in the case of poetry) takes place starting with the character (e.g. temperate or

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<sup>18</sup> Socrates also draws attention to inappropriate modes of music, e.g., the music that is “suitable for drinking parties.” This music is an example of the sort of music that Plato thinks is inappropriate for the guardians, since it does not imitate good character, but, instead, imitates “drunkenness” and “idleness”. I am going to suggest below that the problem with this sort of music is that it is an inappropriate mix of imitation.

courageous) that is presented in the content of the work. The content is expressed by words and, as Socrates explains, rhythm and mode must conform to those words (398d and 400d). It is in this way that experiencing music allows good content to manifest itself in a person's response to audible beauty: When a person experiences good content in music and poetry, she desires to imitate such content in her own soul. If a person is properly acquainted with the discipline in music, she will desire to mimic such order and discipline within herself. Thus, we have seen that, on Plato's view, aesthetic experience can have a positive transforming effect.

However, in Book X, we have evidence that these experiences can also push the undisciplined person in a bestial direction; some of Plato's remarks suggest that the emotional charge that is given by poetry can incite the surrender of reason to the appetites. Naturally, I need to deal with some issues that arise out of Plato's arguments concerning poetry in Book X.

At 605d, Socrates makes the famous statement that poetry's ability to corrupt people is "surely a disgrace." We know that Plato dislikes the "very serious errors about mankind" (605c) that are made by writers of poetry, and he makes it clear that bad poets – those who lack knowledge and depict falsehoods – have no place in the good city. Indeed, "a bad poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth and by gratifying the irrational part" (605c).

Furthermore, at the beginning of Book X, Socrates expands on the worry regarding imitation in poetry, and he goes so far as to state that it has become clear that imitative poetry "should be altogether excluded from the good city" (595a). Furthermore, at 602, he explains that artists are imitators of the truth and that "an imitator has neither knowledge nor right opinion about whether the things he makes are fine or bad...he'll go on imitating even though he doesn't

know the good or bad qualities of anything, but what he'll imitate, it seems, is what appears fine or beautiful to the majority of people who know nothing." It is decided that painting and imitation as a whole produce work that is far from the truth and that imitation "consorts with a part of us that is far from reason" (603). The imitative poet "produces work that is inferior with respect to truth and that appeals to a part of the soul that is similarly inferior rather than to the best part...he arouses, nourishes, and strengthens this part of the soul and so destroys the rational one" (605b). However, later Socrates makes the following statement:

We had reason to banish [poetry] from the city earlier, for our argument compelled us to do so. But in case we are charged with a certain harshness and lack of sophistication let us also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy...Nonetheless, if the poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to admit it...Isn't it just that such poetry should return from exile when it has successfully defended itself, whether in lyric or any other meter? (607d)

Since "we'd certainly profit if poetry were shown to be not only pleasant but beneficial," (607e) Socrates maintains that "we are well disposed to any proof that it [poetry] is the best and truest thing." Socrates' statement at 607d suggests that imitative poetry that proves that it is beneficial to a well-governed city is thought eligible to return from exile.<sup>19</sup> This has (reasonably) given rise to the question as to whether there is an inconsistency in Plato's analysis, since Socrates has made the earlier statement that no poetry that is mimetic will be admitted into the city (595ab). However, Elizabeth Asmis sheds considerable light on the matter:

'Mimetic' can mean not only 'imitating,' but also 'imitative' in the strong sense of 'given to imitation,' with the connotation of 'indiscriminately imitative' or 'all mimetic'...'mimetic' poetry is not just poetry that imitates,

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<sup>19</sup> Socrates explains that if the defense of a certain kind of poetry (the kind that is beneficial and good) is not made, we will be strongly attracted to hearing it, since we've deprived ourselves of it - "we'll behave like people who have fallen in love with someone but who force themselves to stay away." G.R.F. Ferrari maintains that Plato "recognizes that human society is not possible without some form of poetry, but discerns in this fact a mark, so to speak, of our fallen state." Ferrari, "Plato and Poetry."

it is poetry that imitates anything at all. In Book III Socrates expelled the poet who is indiscriminately mimetic – in short, the ‘mimetic’ poet; and in Book X he defends this expulsion.<sup>20</sup>

In book X, as Asmis explains, Plato keeps with his use of “mimetic” to imply “indiscriminately imitative,” and he uses “imitation” and “imitator” in the sense of “indiscriminate imitation” and “indiscriminate imitator.” She argues that Plato adds a new meaning to these terms, using “mimetic” poetry as something that is not only indiscriminately imitative, but also thoroughly imitative. It is “two removes from genuine creation,” and is “at the farthest distance from the creation of genuine goodness.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, this definition does not apply to all poetry, for Plato restricts this analysis to the poetry that he banished in Book III – the “poetry of pleasure and mimesis” (607c). Poetry that celebrates divine and human goodness will be permitted, and this poetry will involve a correct mixture of mimesis (in the narrow sense)<sup>22</sup> and narration.

The “true falsehood” – that which leads to ignorance in a person and “the thing everyone wants above all to avoid” (382c) – is found in mimesis that is thoroughly imitative. However, we have textual evidence for the fact that “a kind of imitation,” a “verbal falsehood” (382c) or noble lie, “an image, not a wholly unmixed falsehood” is useful in stopping “madness or ignorance” (283c). When “we make falsehood as much like the truth as possible,” we can make a kind of falsehood useful (382d). As Socrates explains, mimesis is essential to certain kinds of poetry (394c), and mimetic poetry is acceptable when it expresses things as they are. So, there is a sort of imitation that is acceptable and there is a sort of imitation that will be banished from the city.

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<sup>20</sup> Asmis, pg. 350

<sup>21</sup> Asmis, pg. 350

<sup>22</sup> That is, not “thoroughly imitative”



The latter is the sort of imitation that involves ignorance – it involves the imitation of things as they appear and *not* as they are.

The arguments that I made in the first section shed further light on this point: Since the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul are cognitively limited to perception (and they accept evaluative appearances), and since the pleasure involved in poetry appeals to the lower parts of the soul (606d, 607), these parts of the soul will likely accept the appearances/images that are presented in poetry. These appearances will be false at worst and reflective of (but removed from) the truth, at best. Therefore, these lower parts of the soul will accept (and pursue)<sup>23</sup> the worthless or the bad if it is imitated in poetry. This, then, is the reason why Plato maintains that “if you admit the pleasure-giving Muse, whether in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law or the thing that everyone has always believed to be best, namely, reason” (607). Dangerous poetry is pleasure-giving and the appetite is pleasure-seeking. This is the concern involved here: “If you let in the pleasurable muse in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city” (607a).

As Jessica Moss argues, “Book 10’s complaint that imitative poetry strengthens and nurtures an inferior part of the soul to the point that it will take over the rational part is, then, a reiteration of Books 2 and 3’s complaint that this kind of poetry fosters vice by encouraging unruly appetites and leading spirit astray.” Indeed, though my above analysis of Plato’s discussion of poetry in Books II and III showed that poetry can have a positive transforming effect, it is also clear that Books II and III advocate the censorship of poetry: If poetry comprises bad content and expresses bad characters, since the listeners and actors tend to develop in their

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<sup>23</sup> Again, at 500d we are told that people imitate that toward which they feel wonder. We feel wonder when we experience poetry and I have argued that, on Plato’s view, this is why we imitate or pursue the content therein.

own souls the characters in the poem, guardians who are exposed to bad poetry are likely to develop bad characters. When poetry misrepresents what is ethically appropriate, and when a person performs this kind of poetry, since imitation has the capacity to move and change a person, it can cause her to embrace the wrong kind of behavior. As Socrates explains, poetry does in fact have the power – in the case of buffoonery, sex, anger, and desires, pleasures, and pains – to “nurture and water” the lower parts of the soul and establish “them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled” (606d).

However, by being exposed to poetry that captures the nature of something true – while they cannot perceive it – the appetite and spirit can be trained to track the higher value that such poetry presents. Poetry that imitates appearances and involves ignorance will corrupt those who experience or perform it, but poetry that imitates things as they are can be used in moral education.

When we distinguish good poetry from bad poetry we must know what it is supposed to imitate so that we can determine whether or not it has, in fact, imitated the thing of which it claims to be an image. Nevertheless, poetry aims to capture that which is more difficult to understand than that which visual art aims to capture – an appreciation of the way things look. The standards that poetry must meet are, as G.R.F. Ferrari argues, “constraints of truth and understanding imported from the kind of serious discourse in which Socrates wished to be engaged. Imitation is parasitic on what is imitated...poetic image-making aims to capture not just how people look, but how they feel and act.”<sup>24</sup> Ferrari sheds light on this point in the following passage:

The poet has a skill all on his own: not understanding, but capturing the appearance, the look and feel of human life. But just as an image is, or rather

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<sup>24</sup> Ferrari, pg. 105

should be (in Plato's view), for the sake of its original, the art of image-making is destined to be the helpmate of that art that seeks truth. Poetry cannot, so to speak, be trusted on its own but as the ward of a philosophic guardian can put its talent to good use.<sup>25</sup>

The poetry that can be used in moral education is the poetry that involves the narrow sort of mimesis – the imitation of things as they are. This is the sort of poetry that can have the positive transforming effect that I explained in the second part of this section. Poetry is able to communicate emotions, but it is also able to convey the meaning or content that underlies those emotions. For this reason – because imitation has the capacity to express a certain kind of good content – and because performing or experiencing certain imitations aids one in developing a good character, the narrow sort of mimesis is appropriate in the good city.

This line of reasoning also explains why Plato suggests that certain music is appropriate in the good city, while other music is not. In addition to drawing attention to the modes of music that imitate good character that I discussed above, Socrates draws attention to modes of music that are inappropriate for the guardians; e.g., he makes clear that the mode of music that is “suitable for drinking parties” is inappropriate because it imitates “drunkenness” and “idleness.” With an eye to Asmis' view, I suggest that this music involves an inappropriate mix between a thoroughly imitative mode and the lyrics (content) or, perhaps, if the music has no lyrics, between two kinds of modes and/or the rhythm. At 398d, Socrates states that “the mode and rhythm must fit the words.” In the case of the music that Plato rejects, the mix between the mode and the words is inappropriate. On the other hand, the kind of music that expresses good content via the narrow sort of imitation (the kind that captures something true) is good music.

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<sup>25</sup> Ferrari, pg. 108

I am arguing that, for Plato, the kind of poetry and music that expresses good content through “appropriate imitation” – is good art. Good poetry and music is, as Asmis puts it, “carefully designed to confer a maximum of moral benefit by providing an experience that simulates that of a good person as closely as possible.” This is the sort of poetry and music that can aid one in the recognition of reason – by training a person to develop a good character, something akin to reason, it allows for a person to see the kinship between reason and herself (402). Thus, since reason is essential to the art that seeks truth, good poetry and music is the “helpmate of that art that seeks truth.” I argue, then, that the ignorant sort of artist is the one who is banished from the city, while the artist who implants “the image of good moral habit” in his poetry or music creates the art that potentially returns from exile.

Though Plato is quite critical of image-making in art, we have reason to believe that there are cases in which mimesis is appropriate.<sup>26</sup> We have sufficient reason to believe that appropriate imitation (the narrow sort of mimesis distinguished by Amis) is the sort of imitation does not lead to ignorance in a person. Rather, it is the sort of imitation by which the talent of music and poetry can be put to good use.

Therefore, at this point I have shown that, in Plato’s view, there are indeed experiences of beauty via art that produce good character; a person is able to absorb the good character expressed by certain art and act accordingly. In this way, an experience of beauty via art is a species of moral training. Notably, however, this kind of experience is not an immediate source of insight into knowledge of the Good itself. In other words, one does not have an experience of

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<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Richardson Lear explains that “poetic image-making has a function, according to Socrates: It allows the rulers and others in authority to say something, for civic benefit, about the truth of the past... beautiful and good poetry is truthful in its pattern because it is an image of reality, and this is what it is *for*.” See Lear “Plato on Learning to Love Beauty,” *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic*, pg. 115

beautiful art and then immediately become morally reformed. Instead experiences of beautiful art are a part of a gradual process of education.

Plato argues that good education – education that improves people morally – should create in a person a love (*eros*) of beauty no matter where he apprehends it, whether it be in buildings or orderly movements of heavenly bodies, people, poetry or paintings (*Republic* 401a-d, 529c-530b). All of these kinds of art can affect one's character and lead them to harmony and friendship "with the beauty of reason" (401cd). Interestingly, not only do these passages support the claim that experiences of beautiful art, in various forms, shape one's character, but they also illuminate a further element in Plato's theory of beauty in the *Republic*: It becomes apparent that experiences of beautiful art not only produce good character in a person, but they also create *eros* for beauty. As Socrates puts it, "The right kind of love is by nature the love of order and beauty that has been moderated by education in music and poetry" (403a). Hence, someone who has been educated via experiences of beautiful art will learn to love (*eros*) beauty. We are told that a musical person – presumably, someone who has had experiences of beautiful music (beautiful art) – will love people who have beautiful souls and bodies most of all. Socrates states:

If someone's soul has a fine and beautiful character and his body matches it in beauty and is thus in harmony with it, so that both share in the same pattern, wouldn't that be the most beautiful sight for anyone who has eyes to see it? (401d)

This passage is intended to support Socrates' claim at 401d that what is beautiful is most loveable. The point is that the person who has developed a love (*eros*) of beauty in art will see the order and harmony in a beautiful person, and he will come to properly appreciate and love this person. Hence, the right kind of love – the love of beauty – is the love that is taught via experiences of beautiful art.

However, it is especially interesting that here, in the *Republic* (as opposed to the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, which also consider *eros* and its relationship with beauty) the focus is strictly on a nonsexual kind of *eros*. For instance, in the *Republic*, the discussion of *eros* does not at all involve the kind of madness that *eros* occasions in the *Phaedrus*. In the *Republic*, madness is actually dangerous to *eros*, and the sexual part of *eros* is something that can cause a person to be “reproached as untrained in music and poetry and lacking in appreciation for what is fine and beautiful” (403c).<sup>27</sup> If people are to “love in the right way,” on the other hand, sexual pleasure must not be involved (403ab). A lover should only treat his boy “as a father would a son, for the sake of what is fine and beautiful,” but it must not go any further than this (403bc). The sexual part of *eros* is, as it were, downplayed when Plato refers to the “right kind of love” in the *Republic*.

On the other hand, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, the sexual part of *eros* is involved in moral reformation. This is, in part, what distinguishes the experiences of beauty that Plato discusses in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* from the experiences of beauty that he describes in the *Republic*. Furthermore, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Plato specifically discusses erotic experiences of beautiful people, and these experiences involve more emotion than the experiences of beautiful art that we have seen in the *Republic*. In fact, one might suggest that Plato describes an erotic experience of a beautiful person in a way that is quite similar to certain descriptions and definitions of experiences of the ‘sublime’ in modern aesthetic terminology. Rather than making a person familiar with good character and reason, and gradually training him to have good moral habits, an erotic experience of a beautiful person provides direct insight into

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<sup>27</sup> If the sexual part of *eros* is something that can cause a person to be “reproached as untrained in music and poetry,” this suggests that the love of beauty that is taught via poetry and music is a nonsexual love.

apprehending the Form of Beauty itself. I turn now to an examination of *eros* and experiences of beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

### III. EROTIC EXPERIENCES OF BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE IN THE *SYMPOSIUM* AND *PHAEDRUS*

In the previous section of this chapter I argued that the kind of aesthetic experience that is described in the *Republic* (an experience of beauty via art) is one that has the capacity to produce actions; that is to say, a person is able to absorb the good character that is potentially expressed through music and poetry, and act accordingly. Thus, this kind of experience potentially gives rise to moral training. On the other hand, the erotic experiences of beauty that are described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* emphasize love (*eros*), and while these experiences potentially facilitate moral improvement, it is a good question as to whether they facilitate a different sort of moral improvement than that which results from the experiences of art in the *Republic*. Accordingly, one might wonder whether the accounts of aesthetic experience that Plato gives in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are consistent with the account that he gives in the *Republic*. These are the questions that I shall address in this section.

I shall argue that beauty plays two roles in Plato's general theory of moral progress: (1) Some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; that is, these experiences can be used to promote the kind of training that Plato suggests should take place during the beginning stages of education in the *Republic*. This is an affective kind of training, whereby a person learns to feel appropriately toward appropriate things. Experiences of beauty via art have the capacity to influence a person's character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. (2) An erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and

*Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from (1) in that it adds a higher kind of cognitive component which is lacking in (1). In (1), cognition is involved (cognition is involved in all affection), but only as perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, erotic experiences of beautiful people promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

Furthermore, I shall argue that Plato's accounts of aesthetic experience in the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* are, in no way, inconsistent. Though these dialogues do, indeed, describe different kinds of experiences, both the experience of beauty through art and the erotic experience of beauty give rise to moral reformation. Specifically, people who are exposed to the experience of beauty through art will potentially have their desires trained to track the Good, and people who are exposed to erotic experiences of beauty will potentially derive insight into the nature of the Good. Since the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* emphasize *erotic* experiences of beauty, whereas the *Republic* does not, I shall begin by examining the specific role that *eros* plays in Plato's account of aesthetics in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, in turn.

In the *Symposium*, *eros* is honored as being the best 'collaborator' (*synergon*) for the task of acquiring the ultimate possession (212b) – the vision of the Beautiful itself. *Eros* is described as a potentially uplifting force that is particularly suited for facilitating an understanding of the Form of Beauty. I want to examine this point more closely in what follows.



Beginning at *Symposium* 209e, Plato describes a sequence of “rising stairs” on a ladder of love, which culminates in the apprehension of Beauty itself. On this ladder of love, Plato distinguishes four general levels of ascension: A lover begins with interest in bodily beauty, and then becomes interested in the beauty of institutions and practices. From there, he becomes interested in the beauty of the sciences (knowledge), and finally he ascends to the level on which he is able to apprehend the Form of Beauty. An account of the full process of ascent will involve an analysis that goes beyond these four general levels; as I argue below, *eros*, reason and creation all play key roles in the climb.

At the first rung of the ladder, as the lover has an erotic experience of beauty, he initially devotes himself to one beautiful body. Then, because he has loved one body and begotten beautiful discourse with his beloved, he should realize that “the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other” (210b). At this level, *eros* is the love of one beautiful body, creation is the engendering of beautiful ideas, and reason is involved in the realization that the beauty of one body is akin to the beauty of all others – the realization that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same (210b). Next, the lover develops a love for beauty in the soul, and he seeks to bring into being the discourse that improves his beloved (210c) in order that he may gaze “at the beauty of activities and laws.” He will then see that all of these belong to the same kind – he will realize that they are species of beauty (210cd). Here, *eros* is the love for a beautiful soul, creation is the bringing into being of a certain kind of discourse, and reason is involved in the realization that all beautiful activities and laws are species of beauty. Then, the lover will see the beauty in the sciences (the beauty of knowledge), turning to “the great sea of beauty” and giving birth to “many beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom” (210e). Here, reason allows the lover to see the beauty in knowledge, and creates the kind of

noble discourse that is involved in philosophy (210d). It is the creation of philosophy that finally leads to the lover's apprehension of the Form (210d-e).

At each level of the ladder, the lover is stimulated by the object of *eros* to "realize" and "grasp" something about what makes it beautiful. *Logos*, thus, guides *eros* and helps the soul transcend previous aspirations by directing *eros* toward new, superior objects of beauty. Furthermore, at each level the lover is motivated to think that "wild gaping" after the initial object of one's *eros* is a despicable and small pursuit (210b).<sup>28</sup> *Eros* inspires the lover to bring forth *logos*, which shows that each new object of beauty is superior to the last. *Logos* then reorients *eros* to its new object, and finally, in the best case scenario, the lover aspires to knowledge of that one Form that "all the other beautiful things share in" (211b). Hence, finally, the ascent of the ladder of love culminates with a vision of beauty itself (211a-d) – the "final and highest Mystery."

This Mystery is distinguished from lesser Mysteries of Love, and this distinction is a crucial aspect of understanding Plato's conception of the relationship between beauty and *eros*. The lesser Mysteries can be understood as follows: While everyone possesses love (*eros*) for the good (205a),<sup>29</sup> lovers come in different varieties. In particular, there is a distinction between generic love and specific love. Generic love is the love that everyone possesses for the good. When this general love of the good takes certain forms – that is to say, when desire for the good

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<sup>28</sup> This is to say that the lover must transcend certain objects as objects that are worthy of being overall-goals of his love.

<sup>29</sup> The relationship between the beautiful and the good is problematic in the *Symposium* as well as in other dialogues, and I do not intend to provide an exhaustive explanation of that here. However, with an eye to the arguments of G.R.F. Ferrari in "Platonic Love," let us say that "The beautiful is thought of as the quality by which the Good shines and shows itself to us. We can then claim that the ascent to the Beautiful itself is indeed also an ascent to the Good itself, but described so as to bring out at every turn what it is about the Good that captivates us." See Ferrari, pg. 260

is focused on the beautiful – generic love becomes specific love (205a-d). Indeed, specific love is love of “begetting and giving birth in the beautiful,” whereby beauty plays the role of “midwife to generation” (206d-e). Among those who beget and give birth in beauty, there are those who are only “pregnant in body” (those who will create biological offspring) and there are those who are “more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies,” (those who will create psychological offspring) (209). The latter kind of lover will create “immortal children,” which are honored more than human offspring (209e). Those who create laws and speeches, and those who engage in philosophy, most importantly, but also in poetry, exemplify such lovers (209e). Indeed, poetry is presented more favorably in the *Symposium* than in the *Republic*. Poetic activity, like philosophical activity,<sup>30</sup> is presented as something that begets “wisdom and the rest of virtue” (209a), and is motivated by love (*eros*).<sup>31</sup>

The greater Mysteries of love, on the other hand, are the Mysteries that not everyone will come to understand. Only those lovers who follow a structured pathway to the Good will understand the final and highest Mystery (210a). It is here, at the level of the greater Mysteries, that a lover is able to reach the highest goal – the vision of the Beautiful itself, which will be disclosed to only those who respond to beauty appropriately (210a). In order to reach understanding of the greater Mysteries of love, the lover must achieve a more advanced aspiration than the person who only understands the lower Mysteries. As he gets a fuller grasp of

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<sup>30</sup> Though I draw similarities between philosophy and poetry here, it is important to remember that Plato argues that there is a sort of understanding that is possessed by the philosopher alone, and this is the level to which one ideally ascends. See Richard Patterson, “The Ascent in Plato’s *Symposium*,” pg. 212 -214 for a thorough treatment of this point.

<sup>31</sup> See Elizabeth Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. She argues that “Although Diotima does not assign a place to the poets in this ascent, there are sufficient similarities in her account to suggest that their endeavors may be mapped onto it. By valuing psychic beauty jointly with bodily beauty and concerning themselves with correct practices, the poets appear to be ascending from the first to the second main stage.” Asmis goes on to argue that the poets appear to occupy an “honorable position between the masses and the philosophers.”

the beauty that issues from his love at each stage of the ladder, he must become more deeply fascinated by such beauty than by its object. In other words, the lover must be concerned with the beauty that his beloved embodies rather than with the beloved himself.

As is apparent from the above examination of the ascent, the levels of the ladder are akin to one another insofar as they are species of beauty (bodily, psychic, intellectual). In order to respond to beauty appropriately, the lover must apprehend the way in which these species of beauty are related – he must see that bodily, psychic, and intellectual kinds of beauty are all related to their instances or objects, and they are all related to the Form itself. Apprehending this – that these different kinds of beauty all share in Beauty itself – is that which eventually yields knowledge of the Form and allows for the lover’s complete understanding of Beauty. This explains why the lover must ascend always for the sake of Beauty, “starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs” (211c). When the lover “rises by these stages,” he is able to “go aright, or be led by another into the Mystery of love” (211c). Thus, the lover’s development results from a shaping and improving of his responses to the beauty of his beloved.

However, the ascension of the ladder of love does not happen to everyone; some people will not ever begin the ascent, let alone come to understand the greater Mysteries. As I noted earlier, at 209 Plato argues that psychological offspring is more valuable than biological offspring, or that which is created via sexual union. This means that, for Plato – even though we have no reason to believe that he does not value the sexual part of *eros* – reaching a level of love that involves a union of souls is more valuable than a level of love that only involves a union of bodies. Furthermore, the whole point of the ladder of love consists in aspiration toward that which is worthy of having its attainment become one’s ultimate goal, and on Plato’s view, the ultimate goal is much more than sexual union. Thus, the ascent of the ladder cannot occur as a

result of *mere* sexual interest. This means that the ascent will not be made by those who purely follow their sexual desires – those who seek bodies as mere sex objects. Rather it will be found by those who love *beauty*. Indeed the vision of the Beautiful requires a love of beauty, not merely a desire for sex.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, to even begin the ladder, a lover must have *eros* for beauty.

While Plato's arguments in the *Symposium* show that one should not focus only on sex, sexual desire is in fact acknowledged as a form of *eros* that is acceptably involved in one's ascent. Thus, the *Symposium* regards the sexual part of *eros* as acceptable, while the *Republic* seems to guard against it all together. However, the *Symposium* does maintain that focusing only on sexual desire and failing to graduate to higher kinds of love will result in a failure to climb the ladder, and hence, a lack of moral reformation.

Moreover, among those who do begin the climb (those who are more than people of mere sexual appetite, and are instead lovers of beauty), there will be those who reach the greater Mysteries, but there will also be some lovers who will not. There is a danger in *eros*, a temptation during the ascent that potentially halts one's progression to the top: It is possible for the lover to mistakenly praise *eros* as itself being something beautiful.<sup>33</sup> This will result in a failure to recognize *eros* as a desire for the beauty it lacks.<sup>34</sup> The problem is that if *eros* is thought to already possess beauty, then this eliminates the possibility for it to seek beauty.<sup>35</sup> This,

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<sup>32</sup> With respect to this point, J.M.E. Moravcsik argues that while the start of the ladder does, indeed, involve *eros*, *eros* should not be equated with sexual desire. If we assumed this to be the case, then we would also be committed to the claim that when Plato states that the lover must move from *eros* for one body to *eros* for all bodies, he means that one must move from having a sexual desire for one body to a sexual desire for all bodies! See "Reason and Eros in the 'Ascent' – Passage of the *Symposium*," *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1 (1970).

<sup>33</sup> See Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, "Chapter 9," pg. 196. He argues that we love beauty, in part, because it is something that we lack – *eros* is not beautiful, rather, it seeks to possess beauty. Thus, the lover who conflates *eros* and beauty will miss the point that love's desire has not really been satisfied by the beauty of the beloved alone – love continues to seek greater possessions: Love can also be for ideas, practices, and wisdom itself.

<sup>34</sup> See Richard Patterson, "The Ascent in Plato's *Symposium*," pg. 212

<sup>35</sup> Socrates clarifies, after Agathon's speech, that *eros* (love) requires an object (love is always of something, 199d), and that object is something that one lacks. Thus, love is a sort of desire (*epithumia*). Since we love the beautiful and

in turn, eliminates its potential to aid the lover in ascending correctly: Failing to recognize that *eros* in fact desires and lacks beauty will result in a failure to see that, beyond the level of the initial object that incites one's *eros*, there are other things that are beautiful in a superior way, which will draw the lover aloft. It is possible that a lover might allow his desire for a beautiful object at the primary stages of the ladder to overtake his ability to turn onward and upward.

Though this lover may begin the ascent by loving a beautiful body upon an erotic experience of beauty, this sort of lover will not discover the higher objects of love. This lover has in common with the person who never even begins the ascent that he will not develop a love of wisdom itself; his desire for understanding will be either absent or it will lie dormant.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, the higher kind of lover resists this danger, and hence is a candidate for reaching the level of the greater Mysteries. He is the lover who is "led aright"<sup>37</sup> (210a), and he will stand out, due to his reaction to beauty, as one who pursues philosophy, which is the "preserve of the few" (209e-210a). Thus, only those who are able to subsume the lower forms of love into higher forms in their process of ascent, transitioning their attention to a new and higher form of beauty at each stage, will have the opportunity to derive insight into the nature of the Good via an erotic experience of beauty.

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the good, we desire the beautiful and the good. Thus, it cannot be the case that love, as Agathon argued, is something that already possesses beauty and goodness (201b). Furthermore, Diotima tells us that "love is never completely without resources, nor is he ever rich" – he is in-between (203e).

<sup>36</sup> See Patterson, pg. 213. He argues that "In lovers attracted simply by the pleasurable bodily aspects of the beloved, or needing but lacking proper guidance, the desire for understanding may be entirely absent or lie forever dormant." But, he argues that this will not be the case regarding the sort of lover capable of initiation into the higher mysteries – he will come to understand the object of *eros* as well as praise it.

<sup>37</sup> Some translators claim that Plato refers to 'love' (*eros*) as the leader here (Nehamas and Woodruff). I would argue that by the leader, Plato means an educator – one's beloved, perhaps. If it is, in fact, the case that the lover is led by an educator, *eros* certainly still plays a key role in facilitating the lover's progression. For it is love that incites the attraction to beauty and the creation that is hence made, even if the educator has to teach the lover how to go about love correctly (to subsume the lower forms of love into higher ones at each stage). Indeed, it seems reasonable to say that this is what Patterson is referring to when he argues that the lover who does not develop a love for wisdom might be "lacking proper guidance." See my previous note.

With this in mind, then, we have seen that the “great collaborator,” *eros*, brings together *logos* and beauty, facilitating a long process of upward ascent. *Eros* begins and also makes possible the path that leads to “the highest possession;” it elicits a path that, when followed by the right kind of lover, leads to the knowledge of what it is to be beautiful (211d). Therefore, an erotic experience of beauty can awaken aspiration to the virtuous life. Yet, the fulfillment of this aspiration and, hence, eventually understanding Beauty itself, is only possible after an extensive struggle up the ladder of love. The ascent involves moral reformation as it unveils, through a long process, the superior value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom (the life lived by those who are able to contemplate Beauty itself).<sup>38</sup> Thus, an erotic experience of a beautiful person is something that potentially gives rise to a transformation of the soul and a development of character, which results from an insight into the nature of true value. This kind of reformation necessarily involves the relationship between *eros* and wisdom during an erotic experience of a beautiful person. Thus, we have seen that an erotic experience of beauty, as it is described in the *Symposium*, is something that potentially transforms the soul through a long, difficult ascent.

Like the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* gives a description of the way in which *eros* begins the soul’s quest for truth, and influences it all along the way. The *Phaedrus* makes use of the theory of a divided soul, using the famous metaphor of the charioteer. In this metaphor, the soul is represented by a winged chariot, which is drawn by two horses. The part of the soul that, ideally, dominates the others (reason) is represented as the charioteer. The white horse represents

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<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Hinchliffe argues that there is a development in the progression of knowledge that takes place during the ascent: At the lowest level is ignorance. Then, there is the level of opinion or belief. Between this realm and the realm of the Forms is knowledge, which is something that can be generated through ‘discourses and ideas.’ The initial prompting of *eros* is transformed into a love of beauty, as such. This transformation results from a growth of the soul, and it ends in a love of wisdom. For more information on this analogy between the ascent in the *Symposium* and the ascent out of the cave in the *Republic*, see Hinchliffe’s “Plato and The Love of Learning.”

the love of honor (253d),<sup>39</sup> and the black horse represents the need to indulge in one's sexual desires and to selfishly get one's way. The charioteer and white horse oppose the black horse, and the resulting struggle inhibits the chariot's (soul's) ascent to the Forms. Socrates explains:

Let us liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer. The gods have horses and charioteers that are themselves all good and come from good stock besides, while everyone else has a mixture. To begin with, our driver is in charge of a pair of horses; second, one of his horses is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline. This means that chariot-driving in our case is inevitably a painfully difficult business (246a).

From this passage, it is apparent that the souls of mortals are in a less-than-ideal state. Mortal souls are contrasted with the souls of the Gods, which comprise only "good stock."<sup>40</sup> These chariots "move easily, since they are well-balanced and under control, but the other chariots barely make it" (247b).<sup>41</sup> Their drivers are faced with a "painfully difficult business," since one of their horses is a deaf, shaggy, "crooked jumble of limbs" that is hardly in control and inherently disposed to indecency (253e).

For my purposes in this project, I am particularly interested in this metaphor, since one of Socrates' aims in the metaphor is to make a point about the effect that an erotic experience of a beautiful person has on one's soul. He explains that when the mortal soul encounters its beloved – when the charioteer looks in his eyes – the soul "fills with the goading of desire" (254a). The charioteer remains controlled, but the black horse "leaps violently forward" and tries to

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<sup>39</sup> This horse may also represent the level of aspiration attained in the lesser Mysteries of the *Symposium*. See Ferrari, *Platonic Love*, pg. 264 for more information on this point.

<sup>40</sup> This is important because later Plato describes the relationship between the lover and beloved such that the older one of the two makes the younger one like a God. Hence, since the "horses" and "charioteers" of the Gods willingly play their own hierarchical roles, one might suggest that this evidences the fact that the kind of love that is involved in the sort of philosophical friendship that Plato describes is something that occasions the well-ordered soul. I say more about this kind of relationship below.

<sup>41</sup> However, even the horses of the Gods must be nourished by their charioteers. (247e) Yet, unlike humans, the Gods are wise enough to know what to feed the horses. See Charles Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, "The Palinode," pg. 93



aggravate its yokemate and its charioteer (254a) in order to sway the chariot toward the beloved and “suggest to him the pleasures of sex”(254b). Yet, as they approach the boy, they are “struck by his face as if by a bolt of lightning” (254b). The charioteer then sees a vision of beauty, and, as a result of this vision, he is able to rein the horses in. I shall examine this phenomenon more closely in what follows.

First of all, the two horses have “opposite sorts of bloodlines,” and the black horse is naturally indisposed to serve the charioteer. Hence, the dissension between the horses results in an increased potentiality for discord in the whole soul. This, in turn, presents a serious problem, since (ideally) the parts of the soul will find harmony in hierarchical order. The charioteer must guide the soul; that is, he must become a proficient steersman, and the direction of the chariot must be given by him, not by the horses.<sup>42</sup> That is to say, reason must control the desires of the lower parts of the soul.

Moreover, the charioteer is dependent on the horses in order to move forward and upward.<sup>43</sup> The horses and charioteer are naturally inseparable, but not naturally harmonious. Harmony in the soul requires a functioning hierarchy between the three parts of the soul, and this precludes satisfying all of the desires of the lower parts of the soul. If each part followed its own desire, the whole chariot would fall apart. Thus, the charioteer must steer the horses in a direction that they (particularly the black horse) do not necessarily want to go (upward), even though – since they have wings – they are capable of the task. The wings represent the possibility

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<sup>42</sup> The charioteer is the appropriate director and “steersman” of the chariot (247d).

<sup>43</sup> I just mean that the horses play a key role in making possible the motion of the whole soul. See 247bc

of growth and fulfillment and the possibility of a kind of ascent, akin to that of the *Symposium*, at least in its end goal (246c-e).<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, the wings seem to have a function that is particularly suited to humans, or fallen souls (246d-e, 248c). The Gods are in control of their desires, as opposed to mortals. While the Gods' chariots are winged (247a), their wings are (and continue to be) nourished by beauty, wisdom, and goodness (246de). The Gods, therefore, do not need assistance – they are already elevated. However, the wings of mortals must be properly cultivated by their souls (248c). Importantly, it is an erotic experience of a beautiful person that begins this process. Thus, the mortal soul is particularly suited for the erotic experience of a beautiful person, whereas the souls of the gods – the ones that are already in proper hierarchical order – are already nourished by beauty. In the case of a mortal, it is an erotic experience of a beautiful person that potentially leads the soul to become more like the souls of the gods. Indeed, Socrates explains that “Beauty enters through [our] eyes, which are its natural route to the soul; there it waters the passages for the wings, and starts the wings growing.” The wings “have the power to raise [things] aloft where all the gods dwell” (246e), and it is beauty that initiates the growth of the wings:

When [a lover] sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then he gazes at him with the reverence due to a god, and if he weren't afraid people would think he'd gone completely mad, he'd even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings (251b).

This, Socrates explains, is love (252b). Beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved (250d).<sup>45</sup> This passage shows that an erotic experience of

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<sup>44</sup> I return to this point later.

beauty nourishes that which draws the lover aloft – the wings – and that love (*eros*) makes the flight of the chariot (which is dependent in part on the wings) possible. This means that if the chariot is analogous to the soul, and the wings are analogous to that which draws the soul toward knowledge of the Forms, then the metaphor shows that an erotic experience of a beautiful person potentially occasions the lover's grasp of the Forms.

However, if *eros* facilitates this ascent, how is it that an erotic experience motivates the black horse to run violently toward the beloved and, thus, leads to a struggle between the charioteer and his horses? Notably, upon the erotic experience of beauty, it is the black horse's response to the erotic experience that leads him off track. The black horse responds by directing *eros* merely toward the satisfaction sexual desires. On the other hand, the charioteer, who has looked "into the eye of love" (253e), also clearly possesses *eros*, but he (reason) does not share the black horse's desire. In fact, he thinks that the black horse desires something that is "dreadfully wrong" (254b). It is something contrary to that which is sought by reason that leads the black horse off track. Thus, *eros* can be directed toward whatever is desired, and the black horse, since it has an unreasonable desire, can direct *eros* off track. It would seem, then, that both the charioteer and the black horse express *eros*, but they direct their *eros* toward different objects of desire. This means that *eros* can be directed toward reasonable objects of desire or it can be falsely directed; it will be reasonable only as long as reasonable desires are followed rather than unreasonable ones. Hence, this particularly illuminates the importance of the charioteer's command of the horses.

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<sup>45</sup> Notably, Griswold suggests that the wings, which represent a certain kind of *eros* (*eros* that is incited by worldly images, yet allows for the recollection of Forms), facilitate the flight upward to the Forms. For further argumentation for this point, see "The Palinode," pg. 95. On the other hand, Graeme Nicholson argues that "*Eros* himself is winged, and *Eros* awakens the wings within our soul. But those wings themselves are not *Eros*...*Eros* is not a part of our soul, but a god, a power that awakens this part or this power of our soul." See *Plato's Phaedrus*, "Love and Beauty," pp. 201

However, it is a good question as to how exactly the charioteer is to master the horses, especially the black horse. Socrates does indicate that the black horse can be trained: (The black horse will impede the chariot's ascent if the charioteer "has failed to train it well." 247b)<sup>46</sup> This is interesting because, undoubtedly, the vision of the Beautiful that takes the black horse "back on his haunches" is not an act of training, and it is not an intentional attempt to control the horse on behalf of the charioteer. It is an experience that gives rise to a sort of awakening and insight, which *forces* the horses under control. Thus, the reformation that results from the erotic experience of a beautiful person is particularly applicable to the soul whose charioteer has *not* trained his black horse well. Since my main focus in this section is to consider the way in which an erotic experience of beauty potentially gives rise to moral reformation in one's soul, I shall concentrate on the kind of case in which the black horse remains untrained and is, thus, potentially forced under control as the result of an erotic experience of beauty.

It is noteworthy that when the charioteer "looks in the eye of love," (253e) he is able to pull the disobedient black horse back on its haunches, though it is quite unwilling. The charioteer finally falls violently on the reins, due to his vision of the Forms – this is not a deliberate act of control or leadership over the other two parts. Both before the vision of Beauty and after it the charioteer seeks control. However, after the vision, the charioteer has seen Beauty "where it

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<sup>46</sup> I take it that someone who has ordered his soul properly, and has trained the lower parts to track the higher value that reason calculates as good (see my section I), will experience beauty differently than the way in which the lover in the metaphor experiences it. The erotic experience of beauty need not "strike him like a bolt of lightning" (254b), or force order upon his soul, since his soul is already in order. Thus, I suggest that the person with the well-ordered soul probably has a richer experience of beauty – something closer to the way in which the souls of Gods are continually nourished by it (246de). I would suggest that the kind of erotic experience of beauty on which I focus hereafter in this section (the erotic experience of beauty described in the metaphor) is something that delivers the unruly soul to perhaps the same place that a properly trained soul would naturally arrive. However, due to the purposes of my project, I cannot give a comprehensive analysis of what it means to "train the black horse" in this section.

stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control” (254b). It is this that makes the charioteer capable of mastering the black horse.

Since the charioteer is the only one who has the potential to see the forms (247d, 248a), while all of the parts of the soul glimpse the boy, only the charioteer recalls the Form of Beauty itself. This vision is a memory<sup>47</sup> that is a potential impetus to insight (254b, 256a). It is a recognition and recollection, since at one time (before being embodied) the soul had a primordial vision of beauty in advance of its empirical experiences of it. The vision of beauty, then, lives on in the form of an unconscious memory. The memory, if it is clear, allows the lover to turn away from indulging his unreasonable, bodily desire (250e).

In fact, the “startling” experience of seeing “an image of what [the soul] saw up there” can prompt a particular kind of madness – philosophical madness – as Socrates describes it (250a). This madness is “that which someone shows when he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty” (249d), and when someone is “touched” by it, “he is called a lover” (249e). As this person recalls true Beauty, it will pour into him through his eyes, and “water the growth of [his] wings” (251b). The wings, as we have seen, draw the soul upward, and it is beauty that cultivates the growth of the wings and awakens and inspires love (*eros*).<sup>48</sup> This initiates his pursuit of wisdom and the Forms: We are told that this kind of lover “gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below – and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad”(249d).

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<sup>47</sup> Nicholson calls this “a déjà vu reaction,” which is the reminder of other occasions of seeing this beautiful face, and also other beautiful faces. “It is the awareness that Beauty itself has imprinted my soul, and then, where there is Beauty there is also Justice, Goodness, the vista as a whole.” See *Plato’s Phaedrus*, “The Human Soul,” pp. 174

<sup>48</sup> Beauty awakens and inspires love and wisdom (250de, 252b, 252c). Socrates explains that if we could see wisdom in the same way that we are able to see beauty, this would awaken an even more powerful love than beauty does. (250de)

This kind of madness occasions the development of a special, philosophical relationship between the lover and his beloved. The lover who has been “driven mad by love” will morally improve “the one he has befriended” if he follows his desire in a specific manner (252e-253c). The philosophical relationship takes place if the lovers respond to the erotic experiences of each other properly: At 255a-e Plato describes the interaction between lovers and their beloveds in a way that particularly brings out the ethical meaning of their relationship. Ideally, the teacher in the relationship will come to feel a genuine concern and affection for the younger lover, and the younger man will come to see the goodness of his lover and teacher who has achieved the control of his passions. The teacher is “touched with a God by memory” and adopts the God’s customs and practices, “so far as a human being can share in a God’s life” (253a). He will pour his inspiration into the soul of his beloved and will “help him take on as much of their own god’s qualities as possible” (253b). The goal is that the two lovers will “live a happy life, bound together by love and persevering in friendship” (253c).

Plato focuses especially on the lover of philosophy – the sort of lover who is able to lead his beloved in this sort of philosophical friendship – as the sort of person who has had “a view of Reality” (248a, 249cd). When he sees beauty down here, he will be “moved abruptly from here to a vision of Beauty itself” (250e). Indeed, he has seen a clearer vision, and who is best able to remember it (249cd).<sup>49</sup> However, not everyone has a clear memory of a primordial vision, and,

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<sup>49</sup> The vision of Beauty is limited to those who have had a vision of the Forms previously (250e), but it is not exclusive to philosophers. I recognize that the lover, though his rational part experiences the vision of Beauty and rises above the temptation to indulge, may end up leading a merely honorable rather than philosophical life. However, Gary Scott and William Welton argue that, upon an erotic experience of beauty, “the philosopher, lying between the ignorance of false wisdom and the true wisdom of the Gods, is the one whose *eros* has awakened the recollective power of the psyche. In the nonphilosopher the messages speak merely of the physical realm and only confusedly and implicitly of the Forms reflected in it; in the philosopher, possessed of the philosophical *eros* for wisdom, the messages of *eros* speak more clearly of the higher realm of Being at which the physical world only hints.” See *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato’s Symposium*, pg 220.

hence, not everyone will gain insight upon an erotic experience of beauty. Not everyone will experience the kind of relationship that I have described above, and not everyone will be thunderstruck (254b), as it were, by beauty. Therefore, I am arguing that the kind of erotic experience of beauty that is portrayed in the metaphor only *potentially* has the effects on the soul that are described there. Although such an experience is indeed powerful, it will not necessarily deliver all lovers to a state in which they are able to succeed in controlling their unreasonable desires. Socrates explains:

Not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here – not souls that got a brief glance at the reality there, not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into the lives of injustice so they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there (250ab).

As in the *Symposium*, then, it is evident in the *Phaedrus* that an erotic experience of beauty will not affect everyone in the same manner. Some people will not be moved from an image of beauty to “a vision of Beauty itself.” Furthermore, there are some people who will focus on the mere image, surrendering to pleasure and setting out “in the manner of a four-footed beast...wallowing in vice...without a trace of fear or shame” (251). Plato clearly distinguishes this “fallen prisoner of love” from the person “who has seen much in heaven” and who will be able to bear the burden of this “feathered force” of the erotic experience of beauty with dignity (252d). Hence, the erotic experience that beauty evokes gives rise to options; that is, one might be “raised aloft” or one might simply be a “fallen prisoner of love.” Indeed, *eros* does not at all guarantee transcendence, and importantly, the wings – which elevate the soul – will not work properly if the horses are not guided by the charioteer. *Eros* cannot aid in transcendence when the black horse succeeds in directing the chariot toward its unreasonable desire. That means that

either the black horse must be trained to obey the charioteer, or the charioteer must have the capacity to recall a vision of Beauty such that the horse is forced to comply, as described at 254e.

The metaphor of the charioteer shows that the potential glimpse of the Forms which occurs during an erotic experience of beauty can prompt a person to master her baser desires. The general mastery of these baser desires allows lovers to be able to conduct a way of life appropriate for those who have experienced the edifying effects of *eros*: Those who have mastered their lower desires will be in full possession of *eros*, and *eros* will be able to function as a principle of unity in their souls.<sup>50</sup> Thus, moral progress results from the erotic experience of beauty that prompted the charioteer to master his horses.

Hence, the *Phaedrus*, like the *Symposium*, suggests that while some people will reach the level of the most blessed Mystery (250c) and a vision of Beauty itself, some will not reach the level of such a vision. This distinction is reminiscent of the *Symposium*'s claim that not all lovers will go about the "rites of love" correctly. In the *Phaedrus*, we have seen that one can become a "fallen prisoner of love," and in the *Symposium*, we have seen that lovers who are attracted simply to bodily aspects of the beloved or who lack proper guidance, will not cultivate a desire to ascend to the level of understanding. Indeed, the vision of the beautiful itself will not be disclosed to everyone (*Symposium*, 210a).

Furthermore, while Plato argues in the *Symposium* that all love is for the good, we have seen that there are inferior and superior kinds of eternal good that each of our souls desire. Some people will reach only the lower Mysteries, but some people will come to understand the greater Mysteries. Similarly in the *Phaedrus*, when some people see "what we call beauty" down here,

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<sup>50</sup> Graeme Nicholson argues that the experience of erotic love depends on the inner nature and constitution of the human soul (*Ph.* 250b-253c). This, Nicholson suggests, is what explains our response to beauty. See *Plato's Phaedrus*, "Love and Beauty."



they will “surrender to pleasure, eager to make babies” (250e). However, other people will be lovers of wisdom, cultivating their talents in philosophy. Additionally, in the *Phaedrus*, as in the *Symposium*, Socrates speaks of a greater Mystery, “the Mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all” (250c).<sup>51</sup> This Mystery can be grasped only by the person who properly and appropriately “uses the reminders” of the things of the soul during its primordial vision (249c). He is the person who has been led correctly (252e).<sup>52</sup> He “is always at the highest, most perfect level of initiation, and he is the only one who is perfect as perfect can be,” drawing closest to the divine (249d).

Hence, here, we see the way in which the *Phaedrus*, like the *Symposium*, honors the role of *eros* in the flourishing of the soul. Both dialogues involve a kind of ascent to the forms that is inspired by an erotic experience of beauty. The lover in the *Symposium* potentially comes to see the Beautiful in itself, and he comes to know that there is such a thing as beauty independent of the objects that we find beautiful. The lover in the *Phaedrus* is potentially taken by beauty, through having gone from the bodily beauty of a boy to the memory of the Beautiful itself, to see that there is such a thing as Beauty itself. In each case, moral reformation involves knowledge of the superior value of the life lived by those who are able to contemplate Beauty itself. In both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, an erotic experience of a beautiful person potentially gives rise to a transformation of the soul and a development of character, which results from an insight into the nature of true value. This kind of reformation involves the relationship between *eros* and wisdom during an erotic experience of beauty. In the *Symposium*, the love of wisdom potentially leads to

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<sup>51</sup> “Beauty was radiant to see at the time when the souls...saw that blessed and spectacular vision and were ushered into the Mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all” (250cd).

<sup>52</sup> This is relevant to the point that I made in an earlier note, regarding what or whom exactly it is that leads the soul upward. As I noted, some people think that ‘love’ is supposed to be the leader in the context of the *Symposium*, and others think that the leader is quite obviously an educator. Here, in the context of *Phaedrus*, we have reason to believe the leader is indeed the latter (252e). It would make sense, then, to argue that Plato is consistently referring to an educator as the leader in both dialogues.

an understanding of the greater Mysteries of love, and then the Forms. In the *Phaedrus*, an erotic experience of a beautiful person motivates a “philosophical madness” which can cause the soul to turn away from “the things which we now call real” and lift “up its head to what is truly real instead” (249c).

Thus, the moral training that results from an experience of beautiful art (described in the *Republic*), and the kind of moral transformation that results from an erotic experience of beauty (described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) are two different phenomena. I am arguing that beauty plays two roles in Plato’s general theory of moral progress: (1) Some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; that is, these experiences can be used to promote the kind of training that Plato suggests should take place during the beginning stages of education in the *Republic*. This is an affective kind of training, whereby a person learns to feel appropriately toward appropriate things. Experiences of beauty via art have the capacity to influence a person’s character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. (2) An erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from (1) in that it adds a higher kind of cognitive component which is lacking in (1). In (1), cognition is involved (cognition is involved in all affection), but only as perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, erotic experiences of beautiful people promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

I have shown that while aesthetic experience in the *Republic* plays a different role than aesthetic experience in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, these two roles are not inconsistent: People who are exposed to the experience of beauty through art will potentially have their desires trained to track the good, and people who are exposed to erotic experiences of beautiful people will potentially derive insight into the nature of the Good. Both the experience of beauty through art and the erotic experience of a beautiful person may give rise to moral reformation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

My goal in this chapter has been to consider Plato's aesthetic theory and his conception of the role that experiences of beauty play in moral reformation. In Section I, I discussed Plato's moral psychology and, in particular, his view of the way in which a person becomes motivated toward goodness. I argued that Plato consistently maintains the Socratic thesis that all desires are for things qua good, and that every soul (and the whole soul) always pursues the good. Furthermore, I argued that, for Plato, evaluative illusions are grasped in the same way that optical illusions are, by the lower parts of the soul. This means that while the objects toward which the lower parts of the soul are motivated may not always be good things, these motivations will not be independent of the good itself. Seeking the good but reaching only an appearance of it gives rise to desires for things that appear to be good, but are, in fact, not good. Hence, I argued that, on Plato's view, it is possible to pursue the good and, at the same time, be motivated toward bad things.

I have shown that the difference between the rational and non-rational parts of the soul is that the non-rational part accepts appearances unreflectively, whereas the rational part – in its

ability to calculate and reflect on appearances – transcends them (it transcends perception through calculation). The appetitive and spirited parts, on the other hand, are cognitively limited to perception, and thus, the appearances they accept (whether evaluative or visual) will be false at worst and reflective of, but removed from, the truth, at best. This makes them cognitively and ethically handicapped. As a result, they pursue the worthless or the bad in the worst case scenario, or in the best case, while they cannot perceive it, they can be trained to track the higher value that reason calculates as good.

For Plato, grasping goodness is something that begins in the lower parts of the soul – those parts of the soul that are limited to perception. In Books II and III of the *Republic*, Plato argues that appropriate education begins with proper exposure to media that is perception-based, e.g. music or poetry. As was evidenced by my arguments in Section I, moral education can only come to full fruition if an agent becomes able to distinguish what she has grasped through appetite and spirit from a higher good that is only understood by reason. Since, in terms of being motivated toward the good, the best case scenario for the lower parts of the soul is that they should be trained to track the higher value that reason calculates as good, in the second section of this chapter, I argued that this training is the goal of the aesthetic education that is described in Books II and III of the *Republic*. In particular, I showed that it is the perception-based nature of music and poetry that gives them an important role in training the soul to become good.

Plato maintains that a person must acquire the right tastes – the right sensitivity to the presence of beauty – so that she will learn to like and dislike what she ought. I argued that, for Plato, poetry and music have an emotive kind of power, so they serve as an affective component of a person's education, but experiences of beauty via art also have the power to train a person to properly respond to order, discipline, and justice: A person who has had experiences of beauty

that have led him to “friendship and harmony with the beauty of reason” will welcome the reason for his praise of good things and his distaste of bad things, and “recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself” (*Republic*, 402). I argued that, for Plato, experiencing music or poetry potentially allows good content to manifest itself in a person’s response to beauty. When a person experiences good content in music and poetry, she desires to imitate such content in her own soul. If a person is properly acquainted with the discipline in music, she will desire to mimic such order and discipline within herself. Thus, I argued that, in Plato’s view, an experience of beauty via art can have a positive transforming effect. In particular, an experience of beauty via art is one that has the capacity to produce actions – that is to say, a person is able to absorb the good character that is potentially expressed through music and poetry, and act accordingly. Thus, this kind of experience potentially gives rise to moral training.

Furthermore, in Section II, I discussed the *prima facie* problem that Book X seems to pose for the theory of poetry that is given in Books II and III. In Book X, Socrates emphasizes a worry regarding imitation in poetry, and he goes so far as to state that it has become clear that imitative poetry “should be altogether excluded from the good city” (*Republic*, 595a). Nevertheless, I argued that the discussions in Books II and III are consistent with the discussion in Book X. In other words, I argued that the conflict is only apparent.

Since the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul are cognitively limited to perception (and they accept evaluative appearances), and since the pleasure involved in music and poetry appeals to the lower parts of the soul (*Republic*, 606d, 607), these parts of the soul will likely accept the appearances/images that are presented in poetry or music. These appearances will be false at worst and reflective of – but removed from – the truth, at best. Therefore, these lower

parts of the soul will accept (and pursue) the worthless or the bad if it is imitated in these forms of art.

However, in the case that poetry (or music) captures the nature of something true, the lower parts of the soul can be trained to track the higher value that such poetry presents. Thus, poetry that imitates appearances and involves ignorance will corrupt those who experience or perform it, but poetry that imitates things as they are can be used in moral education. With an eye to Elizabeth Asmis' analysis of mimesis, I argued that the kind of music or poetry that expresses good content through "appropriate imitation" – is good music or poetry. Though Plato is quite critical of image-making in art, we have reason to believe that there are cases in which he thinks that mimesis is appropriate. For example, good poetry involves mimesis, but it must be created to facilitate moral improvement by providing an experience that represents good character as closely as possible. This is the sort of poetry that can aid one in the recognition of reason: By training a person to develop a good character, something akin to reason, it allows for a person to see the kinship between reason and herself (*Republic*, 402). Thus, since reason is essential to the art that seeks truth, the experience of good poetry (or music) brings to light for a person the possibility of mastering the art of reason. Thus, my arguments showed that the ignorant sort of poet is the one who is banished from the city, while the poet who implants "the image of good moral habit" in his poems creates the poetry that will be allowed to return from exile.

In the third section of this chapter, I examined the erotic experiences of beautiful people that are described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, and considered the difference between those kinds of experiences and the experiences of beauty via art that are described in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, beautiful art must represent beautiful character, harmony, grace, and order. *Eros* for beauty is produced by the moral training to which experiences of beautiful art give rise. The

kind of *eros* that is a product of moral training must be nonsexual (403a). The *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, on the other hand, take up the sexual part of *eros* as something that can be useful. In particular, the erotic experience of a beautiful person will involve sexual desire, and sexual desire – in its proper place – plays a role in the experience that facilitates moral progress in both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

Furthermore, I argued that beauty plays two roles in Plato's general theory of moral progress: (1) Some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; that is, these experiences can be used to promote the kind of training that Plato suggests should take place during the beginning stages of education in the *Republic*. This is an affective kind of training, whereby a person learns to feel appropriately toward appropriate things. Experiences of beauty via art have the capacity to influence a person's character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. (2) An erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from (1) in that it adds a higher kind of cognitive component which is lacking in (1). In (1), cognition is involved (cognition is involved in all affection), but only as perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, erotic experiences of beautiful people promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

My arguments showed that Plato's accounts of aesthetic experience in the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* are, in no way, inconsistent. Though these dialogues do, indeed, describe different kinds of experiences, both the experience of beauty through art and the erotic

experience of beauty give rise to moral reformation. Therefore, in this chapter we have seen that, in Plato's view, there are at least two ways in which experiences of beauty may improve people morally; that is, there are at least two ways in which experiences of beauty may promote moral character.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **BEAUTY, ART, AND SUBLIMITY, AND THE SYMBOLIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AESTHETIC JUDGMENT AND MORAL JUDGMENT IN KANT**

#### **I. A TRANSITION TO KANTIAN AESTHETICS**

As I leave the chapter on Plato and begin the chapter on Kant, it will be helpful to note some of the ways in which there are suggestive links between these two views. I recognize that there are essential distinctions between Plato's and Kant's philosophies, but my main aim in this section is to note and briefly highlight nine particularly important points of connection between them.

(1) Plato and Kant share the general view that experiences of beauty cannot and should not be divorced from morality. We have seen that, for Plato, beauty is indeed "capable of reorienting one's life through one's engagement with it."<sup>53</sup> (2) Specifically, I have shown that Plato distinguishes between two kinds of experiences of beauty, experiences of beauty via art

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<sup>53</sup> I borrow this phrase from Alexander Nehamas. See *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007)



and erotic experiences of beautiful people. Accordingly, there are at least two ways in which experiences of beauty may improve people morally; that is, there are at least two ways in which they may promote moral character. As I argued in the previous chapter, Plato relegates the experience of ordinary art objects to (at best) ways to achieve *moral training*. On the other hand, an erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from an experience of beauty via art in that it adds a different kind of cognitive component. In an experience of beauty via art, the cognition involved is only perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They entail knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, these kinds of experiences promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

Kant also distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetic experience. He wants to show that the experience of *beauty* is especially capable of preparing us for loving something without interest (29:267). On the other hand, an experience of the *sublime* best captures what Kant calls ‘moral feeling,’ and hence, it is the sublime that teaches us to “esteem something even against our interest” (29:267). As I shall argue in Section V, the sublime is what genuinely characterizes moral dignity through a presentation of reason’s dominance over sensibility (29:269). This kind of moral context is more akin to what I have called ‘moral growth’ in my analysis of Plato’s discussion of the erotic experience of beauty than to the kind of moral training that Plato describes in the *Republic* or the kind of moral improvement that Kant alludes to in his discussion of an experience of beauty in nature. Thus, the work that I do in these first two chapters sheds

light on interesting connections between the moral training that occurs as a result of an experience of beauty in art in Plato's *Republic* and Kant's discussion of experiences of beauty, and the moral growth that occurs as a result of erotic experiences of beauty in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and Kant's discussion of experiences of the sublime. Hence, Plato's and Kant's shared thesis that aesthetic experience cannot and should not be divorced from morality, and the parallel between the two sorts of aesthetic experience that Plato and Kant each describe, mark the first two points of connection that I want to emphasize.

Now that I have pointed out the general parallel between the two kinds of aesthetic experience that Plato discusses and the two kinds of aesthetic experience that Kant discusses, I shall consider some more specific connections between Plato's and Kant's aesthetics. (3) I want to draw attention to a particularly important point of connection between Kant's phenomenological explanation of aesthetic experience and Plato's view as to how music communicates goodness and rational orderliness in general. For Kant, in order for a theoretical cognition to occur – as we know from the first *Critique* – the empirical manifold must be synthesized by imagination in conformity with the concepts of the understanding; the imagination is the mediator which enables us to bring an experienced particular under the appropriate concept. This relationship between the imagination and understanding is the subjective condition for objective cognition. However, aesthetic experience leads to certain alterations in the usual process; the process of subsumption no longer takes place, and instead, a harmonious interplay of the faculties occurs. This is because, in the aesthetic case, the faculties fulfill the required relations for cognition, but no determinate concept is present. When beauty is experienced, the imagination is confronted with something felt to be purposively just right, but the understanding has no concept of any sort of entity of which this particular now being

experienced may be considered an exemplar. The imagination is free in the sense that it is not constrained by any prior conceptual boundaries. Here, the faculties are able to harmonize without the application of a determinate concept. Thus, there is a kind of alteration in the process that the cognitive faculties usually undergo, and because of not only the alteration in the experience but also the existence of the prior subjective condition for objective cognition, something else – acquaintance with the moral attitude – is reached.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, according to Plato, aesthetic phenomena (music, speech, poetry) express something that we experience and then alterations can be made with respect to our character.<sup>55</sup> Plato claims that we have within us a prior kind of longing for the good – a prior idea of the Good that is at work within us. We perceive aesthetic objects in such a way that they arouse that prior idea of the good. So when we are given a glimpse of goodness through aesthetic experience – via the alteration (in character and eventually in our choices) that takes place – we will eventually reach something else, something higher, the Good itself. The analogy that I am drawing, then, is that both Plato and Kant suggest that there is a certain kind of alteration that comes about through aesthetic experience, and this, along with an a priori condition – the prior longing for the Good in Plato’s case, and the subjective condition for objective cognition in Kant’s case – acquaints a person with the moral.

The alteration that Plato describes is a more permanent one than the alteration that Kant describes; for Plato, one’s character may be permanently altered through aesthetic experience, whereas for Kant aesthetic experience temporarily alters a certain cognitive process.

Furthermore, the good with which we may be acquainted through aesthetic experience – either

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<sup>54</sup> My point here is to draw the connection between Kant and Plato, not to give an analysis or full exegesis of Kantian aesthetics. Of course, I shall do that in detail in an appropriate, later section of this chapter.

<sup>55</sup> As I note below, I acknowledge that this is a permanent alteration, unlike the kind of alteration that Kant describes.

the moral attitude, according to Kant or the Good itself, according to Plato – is understood differently on each view. That is to say, the Kantian moral attitude is something within a person, whereas the Platonic Form of the Good is metaphysically distinct from a person. While I recognize these points, my aim here is to put forward the analogy that I drew above and to suggest that, as a result of that analogy, the *possibility* of the potential improvement of a person as a result of aesthetic experience is the same on both of these views.

(4) The next point of connection between Plato and Kant is, in part, provoked by my earlier discussion of Plato's arguments concerning the tripartite soul. This point involves a question that I have raised after considering Plato's theory of motivation in the first chapter, and it is a question that one might also pose to Kant: How is reason able to motivate or initiate action? In other words, one might suppose that reason is an inert presentation of information that has no impetus to action of its own and therefore requires coupling with desires in order to accomplish anything. Yet, this is neither Plato's nor Kant's view.

It is important to distinguish between the meta-ethical point, which involves what exactly reason is and what it is able to do, and, on the other hand, the ethical point, which involves what reason ought to do. The question that interests me here is, thus, 'How is reason able to do what it ought to do, on each philosopher's view?' Kant's moral theory requires reason (or at least the fact that we have reason) to be able to motivate actions independently of our desires and inclinations. Similarly, for Plato, reason has desires of its own, so it is intrinsically motivating; Plato wants to show that reason must dominate the appetite and spirit and take the lead, if there is to be a certain kind of moral action. Reason must motivate a person to choose the higher option (she must choose not to follow lower-level desires for mere gratification, and instead follow reason in order to make any contact with the Form).

We have seen that, for Plato, reason involves a kind of cognition that has “wings of its own” (supposing that the wings represent the capacity to motivate and initiate actions), to use the metaphor from the *Phaedrus*. It is through an ascent of sorts – either the sudden recollection of a Form, such as that which occurs in the *Phaedrus* (here Plato packs into a single vision the whole dialectical ascent that was developed through four stages in the *Symposium*), or an ascent of the kind described in *Symposium* or *Republic* – that facilitates rational self-control, and hence, moral reformation. In the latter case (in the *Symposium*, in particular) *logos* works as an agitator, cross-examining what *eros* seems to present as a suitable object on which to stop our restless focus. The cross examination by *logos* is a cognitive process that has the power to weaken and defuse this object as a possible stopping point. Thus, *logos* forces *eros* to look higher. One way to describe the successive soul-effects of this process is that reason is bit-at-a-time forcing a reordered hierarchy within the soul. As I have argued, moral growth through rational self-control is then simply another way to describe this ever-improving hierarchy.

Comparatively, Kant wants to show that reason has the capacity to force our desires in their proper place and to motivate right action. In this sense, reason plays a similar role to that which it plays in Plato’s philosophy. In the case of the moral person, it is reason that successfully directs her to choose a higher path than that to which the inclinations tend to draw her. Again, one might say that reason has “wings of its own,” as it were.

Furthermore, the Kantian notion of a reflective judgment (the kind we are talking about when we refer to a judgment of taste, i.e., an aesthetic judgment) is referred to by Kant – in what one might think is dangerously close to a Platonic idea – as an “ascending power of the mind.” This kind of judgment, especially when it is a judgment of the sublime, just is what makes us aware of reason’s power to dominate the inclinations and to defuse and weaken them. Curiously,

on both Plato's and Kant's views, aesthetic experience plays a key role in facilitating reason's capacity to motivate and initiate action insofar as it calls forth reason's strength to overcome one's inclinations and lower-level desires.

There are two additional points (which mark the fifth and sixth points that I take up in this section) of connection that have emerged from this discussion. They are the notions of "ascent," and what Dieter Henrich calls "the Moral Image of the World." Next, I shall discuss these in turn. (5) As I have already mentioned above, the notion of ascent is obviously very fundamental in Plato's philosophy. Comparatively, not only does Kant talk about an "ascending power of the mind" in his third *Critique*, a fundamental Kantian notion – purposiveness – is used in terms of an ascent as well. The *Critique* begins with particular kinds of purposiveness, such as the beauty in an object, and it proceeds to an understanding of the teleological system of nature and then to a "moral image of the world;" that is, to an understanding of the way in which moral conduct can be backed up by a conception of the world. Hence, in short, just as Kant wants to show that aesthetic experience facilitates the ascending power of the mind, and the ascent via purposiveness, aesthetic experience also facilitates the Platonic ascent in the *Symposium* and *Republic*, and also the *Phaedrus*, assuming that a kind of ascent to the Forms occurs after one's glimpse of Beauty itself in his beloved (253e).<sup>56</sup>

(6) The other point of overlap between Plato and Kant here is that the "moral image of the world" is, in a sense, a fundamental part of both of their philosophies. Plato made a point of emphasizing the interrogative experiences that Socrates created for others, and argued that the way of the Sophists in fact undermines moral insights. Plato wants to show that any successful defense of moral insight must resort to reason and the principles of a theory of ultimate

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<sup>56</sup> "When the charioteer looks in the eye of love" (253e).

knowledge – a theory the primary task of which would be to understand the Forms. Here, Plato presents a justification of the moral image of the world. However, Plato wants to show that the good life or moral life is something that encompasses the moral image, but the Platonic ascent does not culminate in it. Hence, here, Plato and Kant diverge.

(7) For Plato, content is always present in aesthetic experience – no matter whether one has an experience of beauty via art or an erotic experience of beauty, one is put in touch with the content of the Good. As I have shown, Plato argues that good content can manifest itself in a person's response to beauty. In other words, for Plato, aesthetic experience is not merely about the form of an aesthetic object; rather it also involves a grasping of a certain kind of content. Music and poetry can express the content of the good, and as a result of the experience of beauty via art a person is able to absorb the good content that is potentially expressed by it, and act accordingly.

Kant also introduces content in his aesthetics, but he does so specifically in the context of fine art, which employs the symbol of morality through a presentation of aesthetic ideas. Fine art expresses aesthetic ideas (content) through symbolic representation. As will become clearer in a later section of this chapter, the artist has the capacity to present a rational idea through an aesthetic exhibition, and – in fact – it is the power of aesthetic presentation that makes possible the manifestation of these ideas to their full extent. As a result of such a presentation, a rational concept can come to be thought of in terms of the aesthetic work; the artist provides an experiencing subject with a way to grasp the concept in an aesthetic way. Hence, Kant's theory of art is reminiscent of Plato's position regarding the experience of beauty via art and its capacity to acquaint a person with good content.

However, one might suppose that these two philosophers are talking about two very different kinds of good content: Plato's view is that we become acquainted with good content through objects that share in the Good itself in deficient ways, and Kant's view is that we apprehend good content through a symbolic representation of the good (that is, through the analogous relationship between aesthetic experience and morality that is involved in the presentation and apprehension of aesthetic ideas). Furthermore, the Good on Plato's view is something metaphysically distinct from persons, while on Kant's view it is a moral attitude within a person. However, the way in which such content cashes out on each view is quite similar. For Plato, the Good itself is a unity; things that partake of it are proportionate, harmonious and united, e.g. the good city and the good soul. For Kant, morality involves a formal ability to universalize maxims in accordance with the moral law; it involves a consistency and universality among persons. Though the good content that Kant alludes to in his discussion of fine art is, unlike Plato's conception of good content, very formal – it involves a relationship among the faculties of an agent – it, too, seems to cash out as a kind of unity. The moral person's faculties engage in a certain relationship, the capacity for which is universally shared. The moral judgment is one that we can impute to others, and it is one of which everyone should come together and share in the recognition. Indeed, I recognize that the good is understood by Plato and Kant in metaphysically different ways, but an analogy can be drawn here because both Plato's and Kant's understanding of good content, turns out to be, in a certain way, unity.

(9) The final point of connection that I want to emphasize in this section involves a link between Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and Kant's general discussion of aesthetic experience: Both philosophers seem to suggest that in aesthetic experience one may find one's true self. For Plato, one is able to become a better version of herself (she is able to grow morally) by climbing



the ladder of the *Symposium*, or by having an experience such as that which is described in the *Phaedrus*. Here, as I have previously shown, one becomes morally good by becoming a certain kind of agent. She likens herself to a God through a relationship with an educator, and is hence, more like the Forms themselves.

For Kant, aesthetic experiences put people in touch with freedom, which is only predicable of the noumenal self. In this way, aesthetic experiences are perhaps linkages to the noumenal realm and the noumenal self. However, Kant wants to show that an aesthetic judgment allows a person to abstract from her point of view, and to become broad-minded. “A conception of truth, propriety, beauty, or justice could never enter our thoughts if we were not able to rise above the senses to higher cognitive powers,” and this is something that aesthetic experience allows us to do (160). Thus, Kant emphasizes the notion that aesthetic experience involves a redirecting of one’s consciousness away from oneself and one’s material and personal concerns.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, we have seen that Plato also wants to show that aesthetic experience at least involves a directing away from one’s material concerns.

This notion is related to Iris Murdoch’s point that aesthetic experience facilitates reflection on our judgment from a universal standpoint, which we can determine just insofar as we transfer ourselves to the standpoint of other people. I will take up a more thorough examination of this point in Chapters 3 and 4. For now, I need to focus on the task of this current chapter, which is to provide a thorough analysis of Kantian aesthetics.

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<sup>57</sup> To clarify, one might suppose that selflessness is part of becoming one’s true self. In other words, by selflessness I mean “focusing on something beyond the phenomenal self.”

## II. THE AIM OF CHAPTER TWO

I have merely introduced Kantian aesthetics in the previous section. My aim in the remainder of this chapter is to give a thorough analysis of Kant's discussion of beauty in nature and art, and finally, his discussion of sublimity, which I argue entails some surprisingly underappreciated remarks. I shall argue that, as a result of the different symbolic relationships that the beautiful and the sublime have with the moral, these kinds of experiences, each in a different way, are instructive. They can be considered ways of knowing the good, and, as such, they influence the practical aspect of our lives. The following are two important passages that are concerned with my thesis:

If we judge aesthetically the good that is intellectual and intrinsically purposive (the moral good), we must present it not so much as beautiful but rather as sublime, so that it will arouse more a feeling of respect (which disdains charm) than one of love and familiar affection. For human nature does not of itself harmonize with that good; it can be made to harmonize with it only through the dominance that reason exerts over sensibility. (29:271)

In this passage, Kant summarizes his examination of the sublime. Later, in the following, famous passage, Kant claims that the beautiful is the primary symbol of morality, and that it is only via beauty that the aesthetic judgment can be considered universally valid:

Now I maintain that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good; and only because we refer the beautiful to the morally good (we all do so naturally and require all others also to do so, as a duty) does our liking for it include a claim to everyone else's assent, while the mind is also conscious of being ennobled by this reference above a mere receptivity for pleasure derived from sense impressions (59:353).

A proper understanding of these two passages requires an analysis of the distinction between exactly what takes place during the process of an experience of beauty vs. exactly what

takes place during the process of an experience of sublimity, and that is part of my aim henceforth. In a first approximation, an object is called beautiful when the disinterested apprehension of something sensible is bound up with an immediate pleasure due to a purposive harmony of the form of the object and the faculties of the subject (Intro., VII, 190). On the other hand, an object is called sublime when it presents such formlessness or boundlessness that it, at first, appears to violate all purpose. This gives rise to a feeling of pain in the experiencing subject due to the inability of the imagination to grasp the presented whole. However, because the object, in so doing, calls out ideas of reason which point to a certain kind of purposiveness in the subject, the overall result is a negative pleasure that is associated with respect<sup>58</sup> (23:245 and also see Intro VII, and Sections 9 and 22). In the remainder of this chapter, I shall give a thorough analysis of these two kinds of experience and their connections with morality. I shall begin by considering the Kantian experience of beauty.

### **III. THE LINK BETWEEN BEAUTY AND MORALITY**

My aim in the next two sections of this chapter is to analyze Kant's examination of beauty and to argue that beauty is capable of preparing us for loving something without interest (29:267). I shall argue that beauty gives us a picture of morality, symbolizing the good via a disinterested liking and an acquaintance with freedom and independence; the pleasure that we take in the beauty in nature cultivates a certain kind of freedom from the merely personal inclinations on which we tend to focus. I want to begin by considering an important passage from Kant:

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<sup>58</sup> I only give a short introductory summary of each of these sorts of experience here; I explain all of this in depth below.

Beautiful objects of nature or of art are often called names that seem to presuppose that we are judging these objects morally. We call buildings or trees majestic and magnificent, or landscapes cheerful and gay; even colors are called innocent, humble, or tender, because they arouse sensations in us that are somehow analogous to the consciousness we have in a mental state produced by moral judgments. Taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap; for taste presents the imagination as admitting, even in its freedom, of determination that is purposive for the understanding, and it teaches us to like even objects of sense freely, even apart from sensible charm (354).

This passage requires an explanation, which I shall provide through the course of this section, but, ultimately, it grounds my focus on the specific points that I take up here. For the purposes of my project I am interested in Kant's remarks regarding the way in which the experience of beauty is related to morality, and in particular, the way in which it draws us away from our own contingent interests. Kant argues that when we experience something beautiful and make a judgment of taste, this shows us something different – something unusual and unlike our sensible inclinations (22:241, 243, and esp. 5:210). The judgment of taste thereby shows us something other than our own way of viewing things as gratifying, and something beyond our pursuit of gratification (3:206). Furthermore, Kant wants to show that when we judge something as beautiful, this reminds us of the good. In connection with passage from Section 59 that I cited above, he famously argues that beauty is a symbol of the good, and that our implicit grasp of the moral law grounds our interest in beauty. He even maintains that interest in beauty “is always the mark of a good soul.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In order to show that the judgment of taste is objectively valid, Kant turns to a morally grounded interest in the beautiful which justifies demanding agreement in judgments of taste as a sort of duty. By interest here he means a liking for or “being drawn to” the beautiful and he still means that the judgment is disinterested insofar as no determinate concept is present. For an additional argument in favor of this point, see Paul Guyer's “Pleasure and Society in Kant's Theory of Taste,” *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, pp. 51.

In order to examine these points, I shall need to consider Kant's analysis of beauty in nature as well as the way in which he brings content – aesthetic ideas – into his discussion. Notably, during Kant's analysis of fine art, he explains that the highest form of aesthetic experience is one in which content is introduced. Thus, my analysis of Kant's examination of beauty will comprise two sections: This present section will focus primarily on beauty in nature and the following section will involve a discussion of beauty in art.

I shall begin this present section by discussing the way in which a judgment of taste is distinguished from both a judgment of the agreeable and a moral judgment. Then I will be prepared to analyze Kant's argument that beauty is a symbol of the morally good (59:353). That analysis will comprise a discussion of both the deduction of the objectivity of taste and our right to impute the judgment of taste to others. After I have done this – that is, after I have shown how it is that experiences of beauty “arouse sensations in us that are somehow analogous to the consciousness we have in a mental state produced by moral judgments” (354) – I will be ready to discuss the way in which taste teaches us “to make the transition from sensible charm to habitual moral interest” (354). With this strategy in mind, I turn to a discussion of what sets the judgment of taste apart from other judgments.

Kant argues that an experience of beauty involves a feeling of pleasure, and this feeling is made possible by the judgment of taste, which is devoid of any interest in the object. The following passage is suggestive of why the judgment of taste is wholly disinterested and necessarily impartial:

If the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care, in any way, about the thing's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it. (2:204)

In other words, while I might make a judgment of taste about an object that I relate to through interest (perhaps I own a beautiful horse), and while it is also the case that a judgment of taste gives rise to interest (at a minimum, I wish to preserve any object that I take to be beautiful), no mere interest *grounds* the judgment of taste itself. In judging something as beautiful, we must judge it via a mere, disinterested contemplation.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Kant argues that “if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste” (2:205). Hence, the judgment of taste must be distinguished from the judgment of the agreeable, which “expresses an interest in [its] object,” an interest that involves a desire for that object. When I find something agreeable, this “presupposes something other than my mere judgment about the object: it presupposes that I have referred the existence of the object to *my state* insofar as that state is affected by such an object” (my italics). For example, when I have an appetite, I am interested in food. I call the food agreeable because it gratifies me. However, if a person has a liking of this sort, this does not prove that she is “selecting by taste.” We cannot be interested in the beautiful in the way that we are interested in gratification (5:210). Accordingly, if someone were to remark, ‘This object (e.g. the Eiffel tower, the iris, or the poem) is beautiful *for me*,’ she would not be making a judgment of taste, since a person cannot call something beautiful if it only means that she likes it.<sup>61</sup> When I make a judgment of the agreeable, or when I refer a judgment to *my state* insofar as the object affects me, this kind of judgment

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<sup>60</sup> The judgment of taste is, thus, a peculiar one. Though it is a reflective judgment, which I discuss below, it can be categorized – with moral judgments and determinate judgments – in a class of judgments that give rise to interest and that we relate to through interest. Yet, the judgment of taste is a disinterested one. Other judgments in this class, as it were, all require determinate concepts, but the judgment of taste is devoid of one.

<sup>61</sup> At Section 3:206, Kant argues that there is a problem with a subjective view of moral and aesthetic value. I refer to the view that holds that something is moral or beautiful only insofar as a subject’s expression that something is moral or beautiful accurately represents the attitude of the subject. That is to say that something can be beautiful *for me* and, at the same time, ugly *for you* since value is allegedly dependent upon what each particular person feels, and no one can be right or wrong about it, according to an objective standard. In Kant’s view, the problem with this view is in its conception of pleasure at base.

produces an inclination, and it involves gratification. Any judgment that involves these elements cannot be a judgment of taste (2:204, 205 & 3:206, 207).

The judgment of taste is also quite distinct from the moral judgment. For Kant, the good is something that we like through its concept; it always involves the concept of a purpose.<sup>62</sup> Hence, we have a liking for the existence of an object or action in the moral case, which means that we have an interest of some kind in it. The good contains an interest of some sort because, in order to consider something good, I must have a determinate concept of it. That is, I must know what sort of thing the object is meant to be. However, I do not need a determinate concept or any knowledge of what sort of thing an object is meant to be in order to judge it as beautiful. In order to see this point, it is helpful to consider what Kant means by a “reflective judgment.”

Liking for the beautiful depends on reflection<sup>63</sup> regarding an object. For Kant, a reflective judgment is one for which “no objectively valid, predetermined universal is available and judgment must reflect over the situation seeking to discover a hypothesis for the situation” (Intro. IV, 180). However, this reflection leads not to a determinate concept, but to an indeterminate one (4:207).<sup>64</sup> Thus, since the liking for the beautiful rests on an indeterminate concept (not sensation) it is not a judgment of the agreeable. A judgment of the agreeable involves interest via gratification whereby one’s state is affected by the object and the desire that it arouses.

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<sup>62</sup> A purpose, for Kant, is the “object of a concept insofar as we regard this concept as the object’s cause (the real basis of its possibility); and the causality that a concept has with regard to its object is purposiveness...Consciousness of a presentation’s causality directed at the subject’s state so as to keep him in a state, may here designate generally what we call pleasure.” (10:220). The moral judgment has a purpose, and is not devoid of a concept, whereas the aesthetic judgment is devoid of a concept (purpose) but it involves *purposiveness*: consciousness of a presentation that is directed at one’s state so as to give her a certain kind of pleasure.

<sup>63</sup> Meerbote puts it this way “To call pure judgments of taste reflective is to say of them that they consist of the result of reflection (without reference to determined concepts) and that they are acts of reflecting in the sense in which to be reflecting is to be holding together and to be comparing representations either with one another or with one’s cognitive capacities.” See “Reflection on Beauty,” *Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics*, pp. 71.

<sup>64</sup> I will say more about this indeterminate concept below.

Furthermore, since the liking for the beautiful rests on an indeterminate concept and not a determinate one, it does not involve interest in terms of purpose like the moral judgment does.<sup>65</sup>

Hence, the judgment of taste is not grounded in interest as a gratification of some desire, nor is it directed to concepts. It arises as a result of our detecting something; that is to say, what we detect does not simply occur within us, rather, we must notice it; it must be an object of conscious attention.<sup>66</sup> What is detected in the beautiful object and, hence, gives rise to the feeling of pleasure is purposive appropriateness.<sup>67</sup>

A pure judgment of taste is disinterested and free. It is not an object of inclination or one that a law of reason enjoins on us as an object of desire (5:210). Thus, it is not at all obvious what grounds the feeling of pleasure (16:229). This feeling of purposive just-rightness is not analyzable in terms of anything about the properties of the object of which we are aware (Intro VII, 189). Kant's claim is that its ground must lie in some fact about the subject of this awareness, in particular in some fact about the cognitive apparatus of the person who has this experience. What is detected is a purposive harmony in the way in which this experience leads these powers to function in relation to one another (9:217).

The two powers that attain this harmonious relationship are the imagination and the understanding. When the imagination and understanding function together for cognitive rather

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<sup>65</sup> See 3:206 – 4:209 for more discussion on this.

<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, Kant argues that “the frame of mind needed to admire divine greatness...requires that we be attuned to quiet contemplation and that our judgment be completely free” (263).

<sup>67</sup> This feeling of “purposive appropriateness” might be explained this way: “If we look at a flower, say a rose, we may have the feeling that it is, as we say, just right; we may have the feeling that its form embodies or fulfills a purpose. At the same time we do not represent to ourselves any purpose which is achieved in the rose. It is not merely that if someone asked us what purpose was embodied in the rose we should be able to give any clear account of it: we do not conceive or represent to ourselves any purpose at all. And yet in some sense we feel, without concepts, that a purpose is embodied in the flower...There is a sense of meaning; but there is no conceptual representation of what is meant. There is an awareness or consciousness of finality; but there is no concept of an end which is achieved.” See Copleston's *A history of philosophy: the enlightenment Voltaire to Kant, Volume 6*, pp. 360–361.



than aesthetic purposes, the imagination is the mediator which enables us to bring an experienced particular under the appropriate concept (9:218). For Kant, in order for a theoretical cognition to occur – as we know from the first *Critique* – the empirical manifold must be synthesized by imagination in conformity with the concepts of the understanding. In the case of a practical cognition – as we know from the second *Critique* – the purposes of the will must conform to the ideas or normative principles of practical reason. Both theoretical and practical cognition designate purposeful relationships of representations to certain standards of objectivity through determinate judgment. In the case of the aesthetic judgment, the aesthetic object is intelligible but not cognized, so the conditions for intelligibility must be satisfied even though an actual cognition (theoretic or practical) does not ground the judgment. Although I cognize an object as a thing of a certain sort (e.g., a horse) that could play a role in my practical life, such cognition does not ground my judgment that the horse is beautiful; it does not ground my judgment of taste. In the case of a judgment of taste, the conditions for intelligibility are satisfied when the faculties are in free play and the representation is not referred to a pre-established criterion of objectivity, but rather to the experiencing subject and her feeling of pleasure.

What makes the aesthetic judgment unique is the absence of any determinate concept present to the understanding (Intro. VII, 190, 191, 6:212, 8:214).<sup>68</sup> When beauty is experienced, the imagination is confronted with something felt to be purposively just right, but the understanding has no concept of any sort of entity of which this particular now being experienced may be considered an exemplar. The imagination is free in the sense that it is not constrained by any prior conceptual boundaries. Here, the faculties are able to harmonize without the application of a determinate concept. This results from what Kant calls the “free play” of the

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<sup>68</sup> “If we judge objects merely in terms of concepts, we lose all presentation of beauty.” (See 8:216)

imagination and understanding (9:218). By this he means that the interplay between the faculties is a state that would normally lead to the application of a determinate concept of the object, which is the subjective condition for objective cognition, as I explain below. However, in the aesthetic case, no determinate concept is available.<sup>69</sup> The aesthetic judgment is a disinterested reflective judgment about the form of something in nature that gives a person a contemplative feeling of pleasure. The pleasure is associated with consciousness of the form's harmonization with the cognitive relations between the faculties (9:219).<sup>70</sup>

In his first *Critique*, Kant showed that the relationship between the cognitive faculties is one in which the imagination is the mediator which enables us to bring an experienced particular under the appropriate concept. This relationship between the imagination and understanding is a necessary condition for the cognition of an object, and the required harmony of the faculties is a subjective condition for the power of judgment in general. In other words, the harmonious relationship between the faculties that takes place during a judgment is the subjective condition for objective cognition.

Although no determinate concept is reached by the imagination during a judgment of taste, it still involves this harmony.<sup>71</sup> The judgment of taste, then, feels objective because it

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<sup>69</sup> Dieter Henrich interprets "free play" as follows: Since we must be able to make a judgment of taste "without having a description of the object at our disposal," this ability "is readily explained in terms of a cognitive process that precedes the process of concept formation in principle, although it is compatible with it." Dieter Henrich, "Kant's Explanation of Aesthetic Judgment," *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pg. 38. Paul Guyer puts it this way: "The harmony of the faculties is a state in which, somehow, a manifold of intuition is run through and held together as a unity by the imagination without the use of a concept." See *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. pg. 76

<sup>70</sup> Kant is not clear about the role that pleasure plays in experiences of beauty; there are various explanations that might account for it. However, this is not something that I need to deal with for the purposes of this dissertation. The point that is important to my work here is that the experience is indeed associated with a pleasure.

<sup>71</sup> Again, in general, the understanding proceeds from intuition to concepts. Since there is no concept present in the judgment of taste, this judgment must consist in the subsumption of the very imagination under a met condition. The imagination is free insofar as it schematizes without a concept. The judgment of taste rests on the feeling of harmony which allows us to judge by the purposiveness of the presentation as it furthers the free play. Therefore, as a subjective power (a power in the subject), the judgment of taste contains an extraordinary principle of

mimics the harmony that takes place when the imagination is in fact able to employ a determinate concept (Intro.VII, 191). Thus, the faculties still carry out the formal roles they play in making a judgment, and the judgment of taste still contains the subjective condition, which is the harmony of the faculties.

If the condition for the possibility and knowledge of experience (objective cognition) is justified,<sup>72</sup> so is the necessary condition for the possibility of cognition.<sup>73</sup> The objectivity of the judgment of taste is grounded in the subjective condition for objective cognition because during an aesthetic experience the harmony of the faculties that takes place is isomorphic with the epistemic relation that must be achieved in the theoretical determination of a given object as it is subsumed under a prior concept (35:287). Thus, the objectivity and universality of the aesthetic judgment is parasitic on the objectivity and universality of theoretical cognition which Kant established in the transcendental deduction of the first *Critique*. Hence, there is a certain analogy here between aesthetic and theoretic judgment. Since Kant is able to draw this analogy between aesthetic and theoretical judgment, he argues that like the theoretical judgment, the judgment of taste is intersubjectively valid.

A second crucial feature of aesthetic judgment is the right to impute it to others. This means that “the judgment of taste asserts that we are justified in presupposing universally in all people the same subjective conditions of the power of judgment that we find in ourselves” (38:290). This imputation of the judgment of taste is analogous to the moral imputation of what

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subsumption. By this I mean that it subsumes the power of the intuitions – imagination – under the understanding insofar as the imagination’s freedom harmonizes with the understanding’s lawfulness.

<sup>72</sup> Kant assumes that the transcendental deduction in his first critique is sound, and that the objective validity of the categories is a necessary condition for the possibility of experience. In this way, the deduction of the objectivity of taste is parasitic on the first *Critique*.

<sup>73</sup> Again, this is the harmonious relationship between the faculties, or the subjective condition for objective cognition.

is required for moral action in the second *Critique* (7:213). During a moral judgment, the practical freedom of the will (autonomy) is the agreement that the will reaches when it accords with the Categorical Imperative.<sup>74</sup> During an aesthetic judgment, the freedom of the imagination comes to harmonize with the understanding even though the understanding does not imply a determinate concept. The judgment of the beautiful is valid for everyone but devoid of a determinate concept and, in addition to its analogy with theoretic judgment, Kant argues that it will be analogous to the moral judgment in that it is also necessarily universal. The difference is that the moral judgment employs determinate (not reflective) judgment, and is knowable by a universal concept.

That the imagination and understanding have a certain sort of relation to one another is a fact about how the human cognitive apparatus functions. It is not merely a fact about how some persons happen to feel or think (7:212); rather, it is the ground of the universality that we claim in putting forward a judgment of taste (6:211). When we make a moral judgment the relationship between our cognitive faculties is analogous with their relationship when we make an aesthetic judgment. For Kant, if there is nothing about me – no interest or attitude toward the existence of the object on my part – that makes me judge the object beautiful, I am justified in demanding that the object be universally recognized as beautiful. He argues that we all have a common sense of taste, which makes such a judgment universally communicable (7:213). Thus, there is nothing about such a judgment that individualizes it with respect to one particular person. It is not the pleasure, but the universal validity of the pleasure that can be attributed to others.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Here, we bring a particular maxim under the law of a universal. The Categorical Imperative says: “Act in such a way that the maxim of your will [could] always hold at the same time as a principle laying down universal law” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, §7 5:30).

<sup>75</sup> In Section 8, Kant argues that if we do not demand universal validity of the beautiful, it would merely be the agreeable.

What is assumed here is that anyone who possesses a properly functioning cognitive apparatus will have this relationship between her faculties when she experiences something beautiful. The beautiful object is attuned to everyone's common cognitive capacity. Thus, we are entitled – in the same way in which we are entitled to demand universality in the case of a moral judgment – to demand that everyone judge a beautiful object the same way we do.

However, the key to understanding the analogous relationship between the judgment of taste and the moral judgment is that, while there is no determinate concept present in aesthetic experience, an indeterminate concept,<sup>76</sup> as it were, is presented.<sup>77</sup> This point requires some clarification: First, as I have shown, beauty is experienced when a natural object's form is purposive for the subject's faculty of judging. When the cognitive relations (the formal conditions for theoretic cognition) are satisfied, yet no determinate concept is present, it seems as if beautiful objects in nature are attuned to our subjective cognitive capacity.<sup>78</sup> As I apprehend the beauty in a natural object, and the imagination and understanding are in harmony, I take the object to be fitted to me. I think of nature's subjective purposiveness. That is, I apprehend an

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<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, in the *Analytic*, Kant argues that no determinate concept is present during the judgment of taste. Yet, in the *Dialectic* he argues that an indeterminate concept is indeed present during such a judgment. It might seem here that Kant is reconsidering the problem of the judgment of taste and is offering a different solution to it, namely, one that involves an indeterminate concept. However, this is not the case. Instead, in the *Dialectic*, Kant is going a step beyond what he did in the *Analytic*: Kant wants to show in the *Dialectic* that an apparent contradiction arises from the following two propositions that are maintained in the *Analytic*: (1) We demand that a true judgment of taste be universally shared by others and (2) we demand that no proof can be or should be provided to determine the way in which we judge beauty (56:339). So, Kant reaches the following thesis in order to solve this conflict: "A judgment of taste is indeed based on a concept, but on an indeterminate one (namely that of the supersensible substrate of appearance.)" In other words, although the judgment of taste is devoid of a determinant concept (as was shown in the *Analytic*), Kant argues in the *Dialectic* that there is in fact an indeterminate concept presented in aesthetic experience (57:341).

<sup>77</sup> This concept of the supersensible will be presented in both experiences of the sublime, and experiences of beauty. In the case of the beautiful it is an indeterminate concept of the understanding, whereas in the case of the sublime it is an indeterminate concept of reason.

<sup>78</sup> Hannah Ginsborg argues that during an experience of beauty "I take my imaginative activity in the perception of the object to be as it ought to be in the primitive sense, which means that I have no conception of how it ought to be except that afforded by the example of my activity itself: namely, the indeterminate conception that it ought to be this way." See "Lawfulness without a Law: Kant on the Free Play of the Imagination and Understanding," *Philosophical Topics*, 1997, pg. 70

aesthetic object as though it were designed to fit my faculties, purposive for the conditions of cognition. Kant puts it this way: “Only where the imagination is free and the understanding puts the imagination into a play does the presentation communicate itself as the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind” (40:296). As a result of this, I am drawn to an indeterminate concept. Kant wants to show that this indeterminate concept is one that no intuition can determine (57:340), and that it is the concept of the supersensible that was specified in the second *Critique* as the concept of freedom. This means that the same concept that is associated with a moral judgment (the concept of freedom) is associated with the judgment of taste. Hence, when I am engaged with a beautiful object, I am engaged with freedom.

The upshot is that when we experience beauty, the presented form is purposive for our faculties, and this just is the presentation of an indeterminate concept of the understanding under which objects of nature are subsumed (57:340). Thus, the purposiveness of an object in intuition can, in fact, conform to the concept of nature without a determinate concept, and nature is thereby seen as a product of freedom. It is this purposiveness that is the ground for imputation. The right to impute the application of the aesthetic judgment to others is grounded in the recognition that the aesthetic object must be apprehended as though it were a rational object produced through freedom (58:347), i.e. as if it were designed to fit our cognitive faculties, purposive for the conditions of cognition.<sup>79</sup>

The imagination’s free, yet harmonious accord with the understanding’s lawfulness during the judgment of taste symbolizes practical reason, which is capable of nothing other than

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<sup>79</sup> The judgment of taste will involve purposiveness without a purpose – it is purposive, but there is no determinate concept (10:220, 17:236). Again, a purpose is the object of a concept insofar as we regard this concept as the object’s cause (the real basis of its possibility), and the causality that a concept has with regard to its object is purposiveness. When we are conscious of the presentation’s causality as directed at us as subjects, we feel pleasure. So, the aesthetic judgment involves consciousness of a presentation that is directed at one’s state so as to give her a certain kind of pleasure, but this necessarily is a case in which no determinate concept (purpose) is present (10:220).

acts in accordance with the moral law and hence is truly free. In this way, moral considerations are – via the symbolic relationship – involved in the phenomenon of free play. Thus, the analogy between beauty and morality occurs, beauty becomes symbolic of the good,<sup>80</sup> and it is this that justifies its imputation to others (59:353). We have seen, then, that in order to understand what makes the judgment of taste possible, one must understand its connection with morality.

Thus, we have seen why Kant famously states at section 59:353 that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good; and only because we refer the beautiful to the morally good (we all do so naturally and require all others also to do so, as a duty) does our liking for it include a claim to everyone else’s assent.” Yet, how is it that “the mind is also conscious of being ennobled by this reference above a mere receptivity for pleasure derived from sense impressions” (59:353)?

First of all, the beautiful provides us with a hint of freedom – it is not an object of inclination or one that a law of reason enjoins on us as an object of desire. Freedom, as will become even clearer in my discussion of fine art, is an especially important idea in the general connection between the beautiful and the moral. The free play of the imagination in its relationship with the understanding during a judgment of taste points (via the symbolic relationship with moral judgment) to the fact that freedom – something that moral action requires – is a reality for us as rational beings. When the imagination freely accords with the lawfulness

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<sup>80</sup> The recognition of a representation as a symbol works by analogy. If I want to use an image of an eagle to symbolize courage, it is a symbol because the *relation* between the eagle and other animals is analogous to the *relation* between a virtuous character and other states of mind. Our experience of an aesthetic object is analogous to our experience of a sensible object of knowledge in virtue of the fact that the *relations* between the faculties during each kind of judgment are analogous. Additionally, our experience of an aesthetic object is analogous to being a product of freedom because the *relations* between the faculties during a moral judgment are analogous to the *relations* between the faculties during a judgment of taste. The analogy between beauty and morality does not rest on any *similarity* among the relevant terms. Rather, the analogy can be drawn in virtue of the analogous *relations* between the two sets of relevant terms.

of the understanding, this symbolizes (and hints at the practical possibility of) action in accordance with the moral law. Beauty, in this sense, “ennobles us above” our inclinations that demand something other than that toward which the moral law directs us.

Since one can only make a judgment of taste when she is not seized by inclination and appetite (28:261), and since a judgment of taste is necessarily devoid of any kind of interest, the judgment of taste puts us in a particular kind of state that is distinct from the state by which we make a judgment of the agreeable (5:210). The judgment of taste thereby shows us something beyond our pursuit of gratification (3:206), and it teaches us to pay attention to something even though it is not a means to our own contingent ends. Since beauty brings with it a specific kind of pleasure, and since it gives rise to a desire to preserve the beautiful object, it teaches us to love something, but to love it for a reason other than that it might gratify us or satisfy our desires.

For example, while looking out my window at the Kansas sunset and making a judgment of taste, I am drawn away from my usual concerns. My attention is directed away from myself, and after the experience, I am prompted to wonder why, earlier, I had been thinking about the possibility of taking a nap, whether or not I had cleaned my apartment or gotten enough exercise that day, or even whether or not I had a satisfying lunch. The experience of beauty draws a person away from such things and shows her that there is something higher and other than her usual concerns. It can put a person in a state such that she is able to quickly identify what is merely hers in her own point of view. After this kind of experience, I am drawn to shift my general focus away from my contingent interests, and toward – at the very least – the notion that there is in fact a reality that is other than the means of or impediments to the satisfaction of my interests. Experiences of beauty facilitate a transition from “sensible charm” to “habitual moral interest” because they arouse in us something analogous to the mental state produced by moral



judgments. In this sense, it involves a kind of moral preparation. Experiences of beauty are thereby impetuses to our looking toward our moral vocation rather than our personal concerns.

Kant writes:

We admire nature, which in its beautiful products displays itself as art, not merely as chance but, as it were, intentionally in terms of a lawful arrangement and as a purposiveness without a purpose; and since we do not find this purpose anywhere outside us, we naturally look for it in ourselves, namely, in what constitutes the ultimate purpose of our existence: our moral vocation (42:301).

Beauty gives us a hint that what we value is realizable; it gives us a hint that we are free and that this is a world that answers our concerns as rational beings. As I will discuss further in my section on the sublime, Kant recognizes that there is, as it were, a brute fact about humanity: reason and the inclinations have a relationship in which one will dominate the other. We are sometimes inclined toward mere gratification, and we fail to see that there is something outside of such pursuits. Furthermore, our inclinations sometimes tend to draw us toward certain actions that do not conform to our duties as moral agents. However, proper moral decision making requires the authority of reason over the inclinations and over sensibility. I have shown how experiences of beauty are relevant to this context. Yet, they do not go so far as to make a person aware of the possibility of reason's domination of such inclinations. As we will see in a later section, experiences of the sublime do just this. Hence, I am arguing that Kant should be interpreted to mean that one is put in a state that prepares her to look outside herself (she gains attunement to the moral) via an experience of beauty. However, it is via an experience of sublimity that one actually has a glimpse of moral feeling, where the inclinations are dominated by the power of reason.

Before I discuss the sublime, I need to include in my discussion of beauty an analysis of Kant's arguments regarding fine art. Although I have analyzed Kant's claim that there is an analogous relationship between a judgment of beauty in nature and a moral judgment, and his claim that an experience of beauty ennobles the mind above the inclinations and sense impressions, I have not yet considered the way in which Kant brings content – aesthetic ideas – into his discussion.

#### IV. AESTHETIC IDEAS AND THE POWER OF GENIUS

In Section 49 of the third *Critique*, Kant introduces the concept of genius<sup>81</sup> and its relationship with nature because he wants to show that nature is the paradigm case of beauty, and that art is only called beautiful if it appears as nature; if fine art is possible, then it must in some way be natural. Nature is beautiful if it looks like art, and so it appears as if it were purposively designed for our faculties and produced through freedom. Conversely, art – production through a power of choice (*willkür*) that is based in reason – is beautiful if we are conscious of it as art, while at the same time, it looks like nature (43:303, 307). It is, hence, in the context of beautiful art that the creative powers of the artist, who is endowed with the powers of genius, and the laws of nature come together. In this section, I shall discuss the relationship between genius and

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<sup>81</sup> Kant makes what appear to be some cryptic remarks in this section, and according to John Zammito in *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), §49 was likely added, along with the "Analytic of the Sublime," during the very end of Kant's composition of the *Critique*. One of the problems that this entails is that it is more difficult to analyze the aesthetic theory as a whole, and it is instead tempting to interpret especially this section as fragmented. Consequently, one might think that it reads as though there is a tension between the genius (who employs imaginative freedom) and taste. However, Kant's intent is that genius and taste do indeed work together, and in fact depend on one another, as I show below, and this – and the relationship between genius and nature – is why the highest form of aesthetic experience is the one in which content is introduced.

nature, as well as the relationship between genius and taste, in order to analyze the way in which fine art employs the symbol of morality in the context of expressing aesthetic ideas.

The genius – the animating principle in the mind<sup>82</sup> that Kant calls “*Geist*” – presents a beautiful object as if it were produced by nature. Genius involves “a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given;” this does not involve a predisposition or a learned skill. Genius is something that cannot be taught.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the most important property of genius is originality (308). Yet, since “nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be exemplary; hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve...as a standard or rule by which to judge” (308). Kant points to the need for a mechanism in art, suggesting that, without this “the spirit (*Geist*), which in art must be free and which alone animates the work, [i.e., it expresses ideas that make possible the universal communication of rational concepts] would have no body at all and would evaporate completely.”(43:304, 49:317) It is nature that gives this rule or mechanism. The following passage is helpful here:

Fine art does not permit a judgment about the beauty of its product to be derived from any rule whatsoever that has a concept as its determining basis, i.e., the judgment must not be based on a *concept* of the way in which the product is possible.<sup>84</sup> Hence, fine art cannot itself devise the rule by

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<sup>82</sup> It is important to note that *Geist* is not a faculty or power like imagination, understanding, and judgment. Rather, it is the “animating principle in the mind” (314); it is the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas.

<sup>83</sup> Bradley Murray in “Kant on Genius and Art”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007) No.2: 199-214, takes it that genius is not required for the creation of beautiful art. He argues that, on Kant’s view, beauty is reducible to form, which can actually be imitated with a certain kind of persistence. I disagree, given Kant’s remarks at 308, 318-319, as well as my own arguments that the creation of fine art depends on the relationship between genius and nature, paired with taste.

<sup>84</sup> The problem of fine art, which I do not have room fully to take up here, involves the question as to how fine art is possible on Kant’s view. This problem involves Kant’s claim that a judgment of taste involves purposiveness without a purpose. In the context of beauty in art, purposiveness is indeed present (the harmony of the faculties that takes place during a judgment of taste is required in the creative process, and this process is purposive) but a kind of purpose – intention – is also present. Thus, it is tempting to question whether a judgment of taste can be possible in such a context. However, this issue is quickly resolved if one sees that while an artist intends to create his work, he does so without any kind of determinate concept of the way in which the product is possible. The artist purposively creates his product without knowing how. The artist is able to convey a rational idea – a full manifestation of an idea

which it is to bring about its product. Since, however, a product can never be called art unless it is preceded by a rule, it must be nature in the subject (and through the attunement of his powers) that gives rule to art; in other words, fine art is possible only as the product of genius (307).

The idea here is that if the judgment were based on a determinate concept of any kind, it would not be a judgment of beauty because a judgment of beauty just is one that is devoid of a determinate concept. However, since art must agree with certain rules that have to be followed in order for it to be what it is intended to be, a standard or mechanism must be involved. The standard must be given by nature – the nature in the subject (the genius) – and so the work must appear like nature, agreeing with the rule so “punctiliously” that it gives no hint of it (307).

Fine art must be exemplary, serving as a standard for others to judge, and yet the artist – if he has truly created fine art, and has been endowed with genius – will be necessarily unable to “describe or indicate scientifically how [he] brings about [his] products” since it is not the artist himself, but rather nature via genius that “gives it the rule” (308). The genius does not know how he came by the ideas for his art, and he is unable to communicate his procedure to others in such a way that they could produce like art. With this in mind, Kant wants to argue that the genius has the talent for putting others in touch with the supersensible without knowing how (or being able to demonstrate how) he has done so. The genius delivers his presentation by way of symbols and, as such, his art is able to represent the supersensible through the aesthetic exhibition of rational concepts. This representation of the supersensible can make an experiencing subject aware of her ability to act in accordance with rational principles. A look at the following passage will help to shed light on what makes this phenomenon possible:

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such as fortitude, integrity, freedom, etc., but since the creative process involves purposiveness without a determinate concept (purpose in a determinate sense), due to the relationship between genius and nature, the creation can be called fine art. For more on this point, see Henry Allison’s *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 272.

Jupiter's eagle with the lightning in its claws is an attribute of the mighty king of heaven, and the peacock is an attribute of heaven's stately queen. Through these attributes, unlike through logical attributes, we do not present the content of our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but present something different, something that prompts the imagination to spread over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words (315).

This passage requires a fair amount of unpacking. First, aesthetic attributes (like the ones mentioned above) yield aesthetic ideas. The following is Kant's definition of an aesthetic idea:

By an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever [no determinate concept] can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it. It is easy to see that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate (314).

In other words, aesthetic ideas are "inner intuition[s] to which no concept[s] can be completely adequate," which is the opposite of a rational idea (314). They are presentations of the imagination that go beyond experience and, hence, "try to approach an exhibition of rational concepts (intellectual ideas)."<sup>85</sup> That is to say, a presentation of the imagination for which no concept can be determined gives us a glimpse of an intellectual idea that cannot be grasped otherwise. The rational idea itself cannot fully be represented by the imagination, and thus, cannot be comprehended.

While an aesthetic idea is conjoined with a given intellectual concept, it is connected with a multitude of partial presentations such that no expression that stands for any *determinate* concept can be found for it. As Kant puts it, there are objects whose concepts are rational ideas "and hence cannot be exhibited adequately." However, the aesthetic attributes of these objects

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<sup>85</sup> See 57:342 for Kant's explanation of ideas and the difference between aesthetic ideas, or "unexpoundable presentations of the imagination," and rational ideas, or "indemonstrable concepts of reason."

are supplementary presentations that are capable of expressing such concepts as well as their implications and their “kinship with other concepts.” These aesthetic attributes produce (yield) aesthetic ideas (49:315). For example, when a poet describes the “pleasures of a completed beautiful summer day, which a serene evening calls to mind,” he can present his rational idea of a cosmopolitan attitude. He does this by means of an attribute that the imagination – when it remembers the pleasures described – unites with the presentation and thereby arouses in an experiencing subject “a multitude of sensations and supplementary presentations for which no expression can be found” (315-316). In this way, the poet (the genius) is able to give sensible expression (through an aesthetic presentation) to rational ideas, yet he does so in a way that exceeds the limits of experience with a completeness that nature cannot exemplify (314).

The powers of the mind that constitute genius are the imagination and understanding,<sup>86</sup> and in this case, since the aim is aesthetic, the imagination is free, so instead of performing its usual role in the process of subsumption,<sup>87</sup> it supplies “in an unstudied way, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding” (317). Kant states:

Genius actually consists in the happy relation [between the relevant cognitive powers] – one that no science can teach and that cannot be learned by any diligence – allowing us, first, to discover [aesthetic] ideas for a given concept, and, second, to hit upon a way of expressing these [aesthetic] ideas that enables us to communicate to others, as accompanying a concept, the mental attunement that those ideas produce (317).

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<sup>86</sup> Reason is also involved in the creative process insofar as a rational concept is presented, but the way in which it is presented – the animation and aesthetic presentation, which is the role of the genius – really takes place as a result of the relation between the imagination and understanding, in particular.

<sup>87</sup> The imagination generally uses schematism to connect us to concepts, but is unable to do so in the case of an aesthetic experience. Notably, however, while the imagination is involved in subsuming a particular under a concept, subsumption itself is the application of a concept, which is a judgment and an act of the understanding.

Genius, thus, illuminates a natural ability to freely use one's cognitive powers. While the "process of empirical judgment moves from imagination to understanding to judgment, whereby a determinate judgment is made, the process of creativity moves from reason to imagination to judgment, whereby the process begins with a rational idea that is later expressed."<sup>88</sup> The imagination presents various aesthetic attributes of the concept, i.e., presentations that develop the concept's various implications and associations. For instance, Kant points out that the rational concept of virtue can be expressed in the following simile: "The sun flowed forth, as serenity flowed from virtue." The concept of virtue has the implication, serenity, which connects the two concepts and expands the concept of virtue by adding something to it that is not logically contained in the concept itself.

In the case of visual art, for instance, when one experiences Michelangelo's David,<sup>89</sup> the subject grasps the possibility of the individual triumphing over the powers of nature. Michelangelo, in creating David, captured the steadfast refusal to be dominated by nature, and as a result, the rational concept of human fortitude comes to be thought of in terms of this work of genius. There is no sensible or determinate concept of human fortitude present, but the artist (via genius) has provided us with a way to grasp the concept of human fortitude in an aesthetic way. This talent of genius, then, consists in the ability to render a rational concept in such a way that it seems to be natural. In this way, the genius, as he has an audience of potential experiencing subjects, generates an expression of a rational concept.

Thus, the principle of genius provides the way for some small part of nature to become subject to rules that originate in human reason. This is the way in which nature can act

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<sup>88</sup> See Jeremy Proulx's "Nature, Judgments, and Art: Kant and the Problem of Genius," *Kant Studies*, 2011

<sup>89</sup> I borrow this example from Proulx's "Nature, Judgments, and Art: Kant and the Problem of Genius."

subjectively (within the subject); it is nature that gives rise to genius. So if something constitutes fine art, nature acts through the genius who produces the work, and this natural power of genius is the source of creativity. What the genius creates, then, is a product of nature. In this way, genius takes nature as a model for the creation of fine art. It is nature that provides the material for genius and, as I discussed above, it is thereby also nature that gives genius an example for rules (497).

With this in mind, it becomes apparent that the creation of art is the creation of another nature – a nature that comprises ideas that exceed the bounds of sense and yet can be captured by aesthetic ingenuity. This explains why Kant argues that a work of art is purposive for exhibiting a given concept. The artist does not merely imitate nature; rather, she takes nature as a model through which she creates another nature out of the material that actual nature provides – a nature of aesthetic ideas. This nature exists in virtue of purposive creativity.

However, this is not possible without taste. Genius is the creative power behind the art, while taste is the basis for judging. So, genius, with spirit, exhibits the concept, but this requires the capacity of the imagination to provide presentations, and also taste, which is the capacity of reflective judgment to select the best presentations from the imagination that will communicate the concept in a universal way (49:316).

It will be helpful to consider Kant's example of the inexperienced poet (32:282). This poet does not subject the presentations of his imagination to judgment, and thus, he is not able to create a work of genius; he has failed to create a sensible expression to a rational concept. His poetry, while it is purposive for exhibiting a rational idea, is not aimed at expressing the idea aesthetically. In other words, while his imagination has come up with presentations of a given



concept, he has not engaged in reflective judgment so as to select the best presentations of the concept for his audience. That is, he has not selected the presentations that best communicate the concept aesthetically. Again, one is reminded of why Kant says that the genius creates another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it (314). The genius must create a new nature for the concept via an aesthetic expression of it. Unfortunately, this inexperienced poet has failed to create another nature.

The artist must be able to give the product a likeable form, which is the “vehicle for communication,” and this requires the ability to judge (taste). He must, as Kant puts it, “override the private subjective conditions of his judgment, into which so many others are locked, as it were, and reflect on his own judgment from a universal standpoint (which he can determine only by transferring himself to the standpoint of others)” (295). It is this that gives a meaningful form to the material that genius provides for art. Since the judgment of taste is universally valid, taste gives the artist the ability to universally communicate aesthetic ideas, and hence, the ability to create for experiencing subjects the highest kind of aesthetic experience. However, without genius, taste cannot pass judgment on any material, and the artist who does not possess genius has nothing to which to give form. Without taste, on the other hand, genius produces nonsense (313). Hence, the two must function together in order for a symbol of the supersensible to be produced by fine art. This symbol is akin to ideas of reason, and also to nature because it is a representation in our empirical intuition. Thus, aesthetic experience is analogous to an experience of a sensible object of knowledge. Furthermore, it is – at the same time – also analogous to being a product of freedom through the role of the genius.

To clarify this point, we have seen above that ideas such as freedom, honor, and integrity cannot be instantiated in intuition, but they can be presented symbolically through aesthetic

objects. We have already seen, in Section III, that freedom is an especially important idea in the general connection between the beautiful and the moral: The existence of natural beauty provides us with a hint of freedom even though it doesn't give us any evidence of it, and our status as moral agents depends on the reality of freedom. The idea of freedom<sup>90</sup> refers to something that is transcendent and supersensible, and hence, it can never become cognition; no adequate intuition can ever be given for it (57:342). Yet, while freedom itself is otherwise ungraspable, in the context of fine art, we are presented with an aesthetic idea of it. Since the aesthetic idea of freedom is one among other possible aesthetic ideas that fine art can express, the possibility of this expression of the aesthetic idea of freedom is part of the connection between fine art and freedom.

The other link between all fine art (not just the fine art that expresses the aesthetic idea of freedom) and freedom lies in the powers of the genius, which is the exemplar "of a subject's natural endowment in the free use of his cognitive powers" (318). As I have shown, the genius creates a work that is an expression of his own freedom of imagination and understanding, and he gives rise to the free play in the imagination and understanding in his audience. Again, these two cognitive powers – imagination and understanding – are indispensable to each other, but usually they are combined via constraint. However, in the case of fine art, the imagination and understanding must appear to harmonize spontaneously, giving us a certain example of the imagination's free accord with the understanding.

Poetry, in particular, accomplishes play that provides "food for the understanding and gives life to its concepts by means of [the] imagination." The poet creates "an entertaining play with ideas, and yet the understanding gets as much out of this as if he had intended merely to

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<sup>90</sup> I note that the idea of freedom, as opposed to freedom itself, is something in the mind.

engage in its [own] task” (321). When we judge fine art as beautiful, we present the freedom of the imagination, and hence, of our power of sensibility as harmonizing with the lawfulness of the understanding. In a moral judgment we think the freedom of the will as the will’s harmony with itself according to universal laws of reason (354). Thus, all fine art represents nature as being such that the lawfulness in its form will harmonize with at least the possibility of achieving the purposes we are to achieve according to the laws of freedom.

In this section, we have seen that freedom is a crucial idea in the context of connecting beauty with morality in both natural beauty and fine art. We have also seen Kant introduce content in addition to form in his aesthetics, and this content is provided by fine art, which employs the symbol of morality in the context of presenting aesthetic ideas. It is only via fine art that content (aesthetic ideas) can be expressed via symbolic representation.

To quickly review, thus far, I have argued that beauty reveals something different from (transcending) pleasure and sensible impressions. Furthermore, I have shown that beauty – via fine art – is the symbol of morality by expressing aesthetic ideas, and it gives us an experience of loving something without interest (29:267). However, as I noted above, the experience of beauty does not go so far as to rein in the inclinations toward such pleasures. The sublime, on the other hand, is relevant to such a context.

## **V. SUBLIMITY AND *ACHTUNG***

I have already argued that the free play between the imagination and the understanding that takes place during an experience of beauty shows us an example of freedom. It also makes us aware of something other than our own point of view. Beauty – as an exhibition of freedom

and the transcendence of pleasure and sensibility – is perhaps best described as a symbol of the good. My aim in this section is to argue that sublimity, on the other hand, which involves an exhibition of reason's dominance over the inclinations, is best described a symbol of moral dignity.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, I want to examine the difference between the moral improvement that may come from an experience of beauty and the moral improvement that may come from an experience of sublimity. Thus, for my purposes here, I shall discuss exactly what happens during an experience of the sublime, and exactly what distinguishes it from an experience of beauty. In so doing, I shall discuss the symbolic relationship between sublimity and morality. Finally, I shall argue that an experience of the sublime – like an experience of beauty – is not only instructive for us as knowers, but also has practical import. I want to begin by considering Kant's explanation of sublimity:

What happens is that our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so the imagination, our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to arouse this feeling, and in contrast with that use any other use is small (25:250).

We judge something as sublime when it presents such formlessness or boundlessness that it at first appears to violate all purpose. This gives rise to a feeling of pain in the experiencing subject due to the incapacity of the imagination to grasp the presented whole, and the overall result is a negative pleasure that is associated with respect. That is to say, the imagination strives to realize the rational idea. This striving for accord between the aesthetic estimation and the

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<sup>91</sup> On my view, "dignity" best characterizes just what it is that sublimity symbolizes, as Kant describes it.

intellectual estimation of reason reveals to us that we should regard as small anything that nature may present when it is compared with the ideas of reason. The displeasure brought about by the conflict between reason and the imagination allows us to see that we are “aesthetically confined within bounds” (27:260), and inadequately equipped for conceiving of the absolute.

The judgment of the sublime is similar to the judgment of the beautiful in certain ways. Both are explications of universally valid aesthetic judging and, as such, refer to subjective bases. Both are appreciated for their own sake. Both presuppose that we make a reflective judgment rather than a determinate judgment or a judgment of sense, and hence, neither of them depends on a sensation or a determinate concept (23:245). Instead, the judgment of sublimity, like the judgment of beauty, is associated with an indeterminate concept of the supersensible.<sup>92</sup>

There are, however, several important distinctions between these two kinds of judgments. Sublimity brings about a disharmony or agitation in the mind, rather than the “restful contemplation” that arises from an experience of beauty. The liking for the sublime is not a liking for the object of sublimity as the liking for the beautiful is a liking for the beautiful object. Instead, the liking for the sublime is one for the “expansion of the imagination itself” (25:249).

Furthermore, any judgment without interest must involve a purposiveness that is subjective and yet universally valid. However, since in the sublime (unlike the beautiful) our judging is not based on a purposiveness of the form of the object, the purposiveness must be

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<sup>92</sup> During an experience of sublimity, the imagination is expanded and the displeasure that this brings is purposive for reason. When a person experiences sublimity the presentation is analogous to the presentation of the supersensible – an indeterminate idea of reason that is analogous to and reminds us of the idea of practical freedom that transcends nature. The sublime exhibits an indeterminate concept of reason, whereas an experience of beauty exhibits an indeterminate concept of the understanding (23:244). Thus, the judgment of taste (whether it is of the sublime or of the beautiful) is analogous to the procedure of practical determinate judgment. This is the case because we judge an object beautiful (and sublime) just insofar as it involves purposiveness. That is, purposiveness without a purpose, or an indeterminate concept of the supersensible.

present in the subject (26:253).<sup>93</sup> Hence, sublimity is in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement (26:256). Since the agent is a member of the intelligible world as an end in itself, and since the idea of freedom governs the actions/ends of the agent, it is the agent (subject) who is purposive in relation to the presentation of sublimity. This presentation appears analogous to a rational purpose (end), which causes the purposiveness in the subject in relation to it. Kant explains:

Just as when we judge the beautiful, imagination and understanding give rise to a subjective purposiveness of the mental powers by their accordance, so do imagination and reason here give rise to such a purposiveness by their conflict, namely, to a feeling that we have a pure and independent reason...(27:258)

The feeling of sublimity does not display anything purposive in nature, but rather it is the subject's use of the intuitions of nature that produces in her a feeling of purposiveness. Thus, it is an internal state of mind that we can truly call sublime; the sublime "must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas" (25:249). This is because when we experience sublimity, the imagination seeks to harmonize with reason's ideas, but the sublime resists the senses and makes us aware of the magnitude of our power of reason.<sup>94</sup> Reason and the imagination are the same faculties that function in relation to one another during a moral judgment, and the relationship between them is the subjective condition for a moral judgment. Importantly, the judgment of sublimity is analogous with the moral judgment because the cognitive relations between reason and the imagination during a judgment of the sublime are analogous to the cognitive relations between reason and the imagination in the practical cognition of an object of practical reason.

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<sup>93</sup> I explain this further below.

<sup>94</sup> "Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense." (25:250)

The relationship between the imagination and reason during this an experience of sublimity is such that the imagination is inadequate for exhibiting an idea. That is, it proves inadequate to its usual role in the process of judgment, and it therefore fails to comply with the demands of reason (25:250, 26:256). When the imagination “strains to treat nature as a schema, reason exerts a dominance (*Gewalt*) over sensibility” (29:265). Although the imagination proves its own limits and is left unable to determine an idea, we are left with a feeling of respect (*Achtung*) for our own capacity to strive toward rational ideas.

Kant draws an analogy between the feeling of sublimity and the moral feeling. When the inclinations are confronted with the moral law (in cases in which the moral law directs a person to do something other than that toward which the inclinations are drawn) there is a resulting feeling of pain. However, at the same time, one has a positive feeling toward the law itself – a feeling of respect. Respect (*Achtung*) for the moral law, the delight at one’s freedom to be moral mixed with the pain of frustrated desire, is not a cause or basis but an accompaniment of moral judgment. When I experience the sublime I get the same feeling of respect for what I am as a rational being; it arouses in me a respect for my own faculty of reason. As I shall argue below, this is particularly important since respect is the counterforce to the inclinations.

At this point, I have given an analysis of what happens during an experience of the sublime, and I have shown what distinguishes an experience of sublimity from an experience of beauty. Furthermore, I have shown that the sublime reminds us of the practical, and, as such, the sublime functions – akin to beauty – as a symbol of morality. We are now ready to examine what, I argue, is a surprisingly underappreciated passage:

In the case of the beautiful, the reference is to subjective bases of sensibility as they are purposive for the benefit of contemplative understanding. In the

case of the sublime, the reference is to subjective bases as they are purposive in relation to moral feeling, namely, against sensibility but at the same time, and within the very same subject, for the purposes of practical reason. The beautiful prepares us for loving something, even nature, *without* interest; the sublime, for esteeming it even *against* our interest (of sense). (29:267, my italics)

As I have argued, the beautiful – which involves purposiveness in the object – gives a much more comfortable picture of morality, symbolizing the good via a disinterested liking and an acquaintance with freedom and independence. The pleasure that we take in the beauty in nature “cultivates a certain liberality in our way of thinking, i.e., an independence of the liking from mere enjoyment of sense,” but the freedom is presented more as play than as something subject to a law (29:269). Yet, as Kant maintains, “not all aesthetic judgments...as such refer to the beautiful; but some of them arise from an *intellectual feeling* and as such refer to the sublime”(Intro. VIII, 192, my italics).<sup>95</sup> The sublime – which, as I have shown, involves purposiveness in the subject – presents a picture of the painful struggle that we sometimes endure when we act in accordance with our duty. Thus, it is sublimity that best represents moral motivation as it exhibits the proper relationship between reason and the inclinations during a moral judgment. In light of my arguments below, it will become apparent that sublimity genuinely characterizes morality – moral dignity, in particular – through reason’s dominance over sensibility (29:269).

When we behave morally, e.g., when we discipline ourselves, we liberate the will from the control of our desires. Kant maintains that “we are conscious of ourselves as obligated by an a priori moral law,” which commands us to fulfill our duty even in the case that doing so requires a struggle. Specifically, sometimes fulfilling our duty involves a struggle “against circumstances

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<sup>95</sup> Kant emphasizes that moral feeling is something to which the sublime, in particular, as something that involves purposiveness in the subject, is relevant.



in nature or against our natural inclinations.” We must, however, act only in accordance with maxims that can be universalized – not maxims that cater to our inclinations or excuse us from our duties. This is a fact of reason, which presupposes that we have a free will in the sense that the will can act independently of natural inclinations. It is sometimes permissible to act in accordance with our inclinations (i.e., when the moral law does not direct us to do otherwise). However, other times we desire to act in accordance with our inclinations even when the moral law has directed us to do otherwise. This results from a mistaken supposition that there is something more important about ourselves, personally, than moral action. When we realize that acting in accordance with our inclinations is forbidden, reason has triumphed over sensibility. The inclinations are dominated by reason when we choose to act in accordance with the moral law instead of our desires.

As we have seen, the cognitive relations between reason and the imagination during a judgment of the sublime are analogous to the cognitive relations between reason and the imagination in the practical cognition of an object of practical reason, when reason dominates the inclinations. An experience of the sublime, in particular, gives a person a “flash” of the appropriate relationship between reason and the inclinations; it is in this way that sublimity symbolizes reason’s dominance over the senses and represents moral motivation.<sup>96</sup> This flash, as I am calling it, acquaints a person with *Achtung* and as Kant puts it, “it calls forth our strength (which does not belong to nature [within us]), to regard as small the objects of our natural

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<sup>96</sup> Guyer concedes this point. He states: “the experience of the sublime can seem virtually identical with the fundamental moral feeling of respect for duty itself.” The key point, he maintains, is that “duty is characterized as sublime because the experience of it is...the experience of a power of resistance against natural inclinations.” See “Symbols of Freedom in Kant’s Aesthetics,” *Values of Beauty*, pg. 229

concerns” (28:262). In this way, the sublime shows us the authority of reason and our ability to act in accordance with the moral law.<sup>97</sup> Kant states:

Our imagination, even in its greatest effort to do what is demanded of it and comprehend a given object in a whole of intuition (and hence to exhibit an idea of reason), proves its own limits and inadequacy, and yet at the same time proves its vocation to obey a law, namely, to make itself adequate to that idea. Hence, the feeling of the sublime in nature is a respect for our own vocation (27:257).

Through this experience, we see the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over any power of sensibility (27:257). An element of fear is present in sublimity, but the object which provokes it “[raises] the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and [allows] us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist...which gives us the courage that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence”(28:261). Hence, Kant argues that we call something sublime because it brings to the forefront our power to regard the objects of our natural concerns (our inclinations) as small and comparatively unimportant. We are able to regard nature’s might – something that we are subjected to in the case of our natural concerns – as something that cannot overcome us (28:262). Hence, in an experience of the sublime, we feel a cognitive relation to something greater than sense.

It is important to notice that an experience of the sublime is not only instructive for us as knowers, i.e., an experience of the sublime is not just a way of gaining knowledge about morality, or being acquainted with a characterization of it, but it also has practical import – it teaches us that we can triumph against the interest of sense. We will encounter instances in

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<sup>97</sup> An experience of the sublime brings with it the feeling of *Achtung*, which represents respect for the moral law. When an action reflects the moral worth of one’s will, the action must be done from duty, and it “must not only be done in accord with the moral law: in addition, the moral law must be the very source of [one’s] motive in acting.” See Ted Cohen, “Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality,” *Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics*, pg 226. An experience of the sublime, as I am arguing, gives us a glimpse of this. Similarly, Yu Liu argues that reason’s triumph at the expense of the imagination during an experience of the sublime represents how “things might be if moral freedom were given a realistic chance in the realm of sense-oriented nature.” See Liu’s “Kant’s Paradise Lost and Regained,” *Studies in Romanticism*, pg. 193.

practical life that tempt our inclinations and draw us to act in a manner opposite to that which the moral law directs. However, since the sublime gives us a flash of the appropriate relationship between reason and the senses, after having that experience, we have gained a certain awareness of our power of reason and our own moral capacity. We know that it is possible for us to act against our interest of sense because we have been shown reason's authority over the inclinations. Indeed, the sublime (because it makes us aware of these possibilities) teaches us to respect our capacity of reason, and hence, it teaches us about the possibility of carrying out our moral vocation.

An experience of the sublime provides "an expansion of the mind that feels able to cross the barriers of sensibility with a different (a practical) aim." (26:255) When the formal condition of practical cognition and its feeling of *Achtung* are aesthetically fulfilled (i.e., without moral determination) one has the feeling of sublimity. For example, when I look at the thunderstorm, I become aware that this phenomenon in nature could destroy me. Yet, the thunderstorm could never destroy humanity's shared capacity for reason. I am made aware of the fact that although the thunderstorm seems omnipotent, it is no match for reason's power. This experience gives rise to my recognition that reason and my moral vocation itself is owed a proper amount of respect. I learn, through this experience, that reason should never be dominated by my senses or my inclinations. Kant wants to show that "this keeps humanity in our person from being degraded" and that our natural concerns should not have "such dominance over us, as persons, that we should have to bow to [them]" (262). As a result, I am driven to remember, in practical cases, that reason always has authority over the inclinations; the inclinations ought not take over in cases in which we desire something other than that toward which the moral law directed us. This prompts me to respect my capacity to reason and its authority, and to act in accordance with it as

opposed to anything else. Therefore, the experience of sublimity – via its representation of the moral feeling – gives us, as it were, a revelation about reason, and we are thus carried to apply it to the practical. Therefore, I have shown that an experience of the sublime – like an experience of beauty – is not only instructive for us as knowers, but it also has practical import. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Kant sums up the point at 29:271:

If we judge aesthetically the good that is intellectual and intrinsically purposive (the moral good), we must present it not so much as beautiful but rather as sublime, so that it will arouse more a feeling of respect (which disdains charm) than one of love and familiar affection. For human nature does not of itself harmonize with that good; it can be made to harmonize with it only through the dominance that reason exerts over sensibility.

It is in the context of the sublime, which involves a displeasure that is purposive for reason, that we witness reason's power, and hence, the feeling of *Achtung* teaches us moral dignity. It not only makes us aware of reason's power, but it teaches us that, in our practical lives, that power should be given due respect, and that it should never be defeated by nature.

In the third *Critique*, Kant shows us that the experience of sublimity evokes in the mind of its experiencing subject a sense of the superiority of her moral destiny. My arguments have shown that Kant's goal of reintroducing the bond between ethics and aesthetics<sup>98</sup> did not only concern the experience of beauty in natural objects, art, genius, and creativity. There is more to his conception of the connection between aesthetic experience and the morally good than the analogies that can be drawn between judgments of beauty and moral judgments: While Kant's claim in section 59, in a certain sense, constitutes the heart of his thesis in the third *Critique*, the further analogy between the sublime and the moral that he describes in section 29 provides additional support for his project by bringing in the notion of purposiveness in the subject. The

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<sup>98</sup> See Zammito for a thorough discussion of the purpose and development of the third *Critique*. He agrees with my point that the sublime plays an important role in fulfilling what Kant set out to accomplish in this work.

fact that sublimity occasions this kind of purposiveness represents an experience in the subject – not regarding the object – but regarding the subject herself. The aspect of the subject to which the experience of sublimity points is in fact the moral dimension of transcendental freedom. Though the “Analytic of the Sublime” was a late addition to Kant’s project, it was added in order to establish a more substantive connection between aesthetics and ethics than that which beauty alone could provide.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that, as a result of the different symbolic relationships that the beautiful and the sublime have with the moral, these kinds of experiences, each in a different way, are morally instructive. They can be considered ways of knowing the good, and, as such, they influence the practical aspect of our lives.

I have argued that, for Kant, an experience of beauty is one that is capable of teaching us to love something without interest. Beauty gives us a picture of morality, symbolizing the good via a disinterested liking and an acquaintance with freedom and independence. The pleasure that we take in the beauty in nature cultivates a certain kind of freedom from the merely personal inclinations on which we tend to focus. Beauty shows us something unusual and unlike our sensible inclinations, and it reminds us of the good.

Furthermore, I have provided an analysis of Kant’s remarks on the experience of the sublime. I argued that during an experience of sublimity, the imagination reveals to us the presence of our power to overcome the inclinations and act in accordance with freedom. Through experiences of sublimity we witness reason’s power, and hence, the feeling of *Achtung* teaches

us moral dignity. It not only makes us aware of the power that we have through our own capacity to reason, but it teaches us that, in our practical lives, that power should be given due respect, and that it should never be defeated by nature. I have shown that experiences of sublimity have the capacity to keep our power of reason from being degraded. The experience of sublimity – via its representation of the moral feeling – gives us, as it were, a revelation about reason, and we are carried to apply it to the practical. Thus, I have argued that, for Kant, there are two kinds of aesthetic experience, and each one is morally instructive: (1) the experience of *beauty* is especially capable of teaching us to love something without interest. (2) On the other hand, an experience of the *sublime* best captures what Kant calls ‘moral feeling,’ and it teaches us to “esteem something even against our interest” (29:267).

As I argued in Chapter I, Plato also distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetic experience (experiences of beauty via art and erotic experiences of beautiful people), which are both, in different ways, morally instructive. The moral improvement that, on Kant’s view, results from an experience of beauty is akin to the experience of beauty via art that Plato describes in the *Republic*. In Kant’s view, when I experience beauty, my attention is directed away from myself, and it draws me away from my daily routine. The experience suggests to me that there is something higher and other than my usual concerns. An experience of beauty can put a person in a state such that she is able to quickly identify what is merely hers in her own point of view. After this kind of experience, I am drawn to shift my general focus away from my contingent interests, and toward – at the very least – the notion that there is in fact a reality that is other than the means of or impediments to the satisfaction of my interests. Experiences of beauty facilitate a transition from “sensible charm” to “habitual moral interest” because they arouse in us something analogous to the mental state produced by moral judgments. In this sense,

experiencing beauty involves a kind of moral preparation. Such experiences are thereby impetuses to our looking toward our moral vocation rather than our personal concerns. Thus, one is put in a state that prepares her to look outside herself (she gains attunement to the moral) via an experience of beauty.

In Plato's view, an experience of beauty via art not only gives one an attunement to the moral, but it aids in training her to be moral. In Plato's discussion of art and morality in the *Republic* we see that it is the perception-based nature of music and poetry that gives them an important role in training the soul to become good. The sort of experience of beauty via art that is described in the *Republic* as a part of proper education involves a training of character and one's desires, but it does not give rise to understanding the nature of the good in the way that the erotic experience of a beautiful person does.

Although Kant does not discuss *eros* or erotic experience of a beautiful person in his aesthetics, the moral improvement that results from an experience of Kantian sublimity is akin to the sort of reformation that occurs as a result of an erotic experience of a beautiful person in Plato's aesthetics. Experiences of the Kantian sublime may take a person one step further than experiences of beauty are able to do because sublimity has the capacity to make a person aware of the possibility of reason's domination of the inclinations. Via an experience of the Kantian sublime, one actually has a glimpse of moral feeling, where the inclinations are dominated by the power of reason. This kind of experience, in particular, gives a person a "flash" of the appropriate relationship between reason and the inclinations; it is in this way that sublimity symbolizes reason's dominance over the senses and represents moral motivation. Thus, the sublime shows us the authority of reason and our ability to act in accordance with the moral law.

This is similar to the kind of moral transformation that occurs as the result of an erotic experience of a beautiful person in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Both the Kantian sublime and Plato's erotic experience of beauty command our attention through a kind of emotionally gripping presentation. The Kantian sublime makes us feel fear and pleasure together, and, above all, respect. Plato's description of the way in which the charioteer apprehends the boy in the *Phaedrus* is not far from this. The charioteer is struck with awe, so much so that he is able to pull the black horse under control. This experience facilitates a change that is produced in the person, and a cognitive grasp of true value. The soul is prompted to recall the form of Beauty, and the description of this experience is akin to the sort of experience that takes place in the context of the love of beauty that Plato describes in the *Symposium*. As we have seen, in the *Symposium*, Plato maintains that an erotic experience of a beautiful person may prompt a person to love the form of Beauty and then the form of the Good. Ultimately, in the best case scenario, the person who goes through such an experience emerges as a philosopher, and achieves knowledge of the Forms and then of the Good itself.

Thus, in Plato's discussion of art in the *Republic* and in Kant's general discussion of beauty, we see a connection between beauty and the moral. Moreover, we are able to see a connection regarding the moral progress that may occur as the result of erotic experiences of beautiful people in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and the moral progress that may occur as a result of an experience of the Kantian sublime. As I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, Iris Murdoch brings these dimensions of Plato and Kant together in her theory that aesthetic experiences facilitate what she calls 'unselfing,' and, hence, becoming good.

However, before I move on to Chapter 3, I note seven important differences between the aesthetic theories of Plato and Kant. (1) The good – either the moral attitude, according to Kant



or the Good itself, according to Plato – is understood differently on each view. That is to say, the Kantian moral attitude is something within a person, whereas the Platonic Form of the Good is metaphysically distinct from a person. In connection with this, for Plato, Beauty exists as a Form, independent of human feelings and thoughts. For Kant, beauty is universal and objective, but it is defined by a process that takes place within the experiencing subject. (2) For Plato, beauty in art is a method of moral training and erotic experiences of beautiful people promote a different kind of moral progress. On the other hand, for Kant, all beauty symbolizes the good due to the analogy between the formal process that takes place among the cognitive faculties when a person makes a moral judgment and the formal process that takes place when a person makes a judgment of beauty. This analogy does make possible the attunement to the moral that results from a Kantian experience of beauty, but Kant does not specifically discuss any method of moral education based on a relationship between beauty and moral training. (3) Plato does not discuss the sublime; instead, his discussion of erotic experiences of beauty encompasses the other element in his aesthetics that exists in addition to experiences of beauty via art. (4) Kant does not discuss eros; in his view, experiencing an attractive person does not even count as an experience of beauty because it involves interest, and a judgment of taste must be devoid of all interest. (5) While both philosophers suggest that a kind of alteration takes place in the subject when she experiences something aesthetic, the alteration that Plato describes is a more permanent one than the alteration that Kant describes; for Plato, one's character may be permanently altered through aesthetic experience, whereas for Kant aesthetic experience temporarily alters a certain cognitive process. (6) For Kant, beauty turns a person's attention to something other than her personal inclinations, and the sublime actually brings us to carry out the revelation in the practical context. For Plato, erotic experiences of beauty draw us "outside of ourselves," but he does not

indicate the possibility of this sort of reformation when it comes to experiences of beauty via art.

(7) For Plato, content is always present in aesthetic experience – no matter whether one has an experience of beauty via art or an erotic experience of beauty, one is put in touch with the content of the Good. As I have shown, Plato argues that good content can manifest itself in a person's response to beauty. In other words, for Plato, aesthetic experience is not merely about the form of an aesthetic object; rather it also involves a grasping of a certain kind of content. Music and poetry can express the content of the good, and as a result of the experience of beauty via art a person is able to absorb the good content that is potentially expressed by it, and act accordingly. Kant also introduces content in his aesthetics, but only in the context of fine art, which employs the symbol of morality through a presentation of aesthetic ideas. Fine art expresses aesthetic ideas (content) through symbolic representation. As I have previously discussed, Kant maintains that the artist has the capacity to present a rational idea through an aesthetic exhibition, and it is the power of aesthetic presentation that makes possible the manifestation of these ideas to their full extent.

## CHAPTER 3

### AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, MORAL VISION, AND 'UNSELFING' IN IRIS MURDOCH

#### Part I: The Murdochian Moral Pilgrimage

##### A. INTRODUCTION

Over the course of her writing career, Iris Murdoch lays out an interesting moral theory. A fundamental notion in this theory is that of moral progress. In this section I am going to attempt to analyze that notion. The main works that I shall focus on, in particular, are *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and *The Sovereignty of Good*. One of the metaphors that Murdoch uses as she argues for her view in both of these texts is that of a moral pilgrim:

Life is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of truth, involving ipso facto a purification of energy and desire in the light of a vision of what is good. The good and best life is thus a process of clarification, a movement toward selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are all objects of love (MGM, 14).

This passage is filled with rich concepts, and in the course of this chapter I will have the occasion to discuss most of them. In the interest of setting the reader up for a more detailed discussion of the concepts above, I shall begin with some more general considerations in this introduction, and then, in the next three sections, I shall move to a more specific analysis of Murdoch's view. I shall first focus on selfishness, love, and the Murdochian moral pilgrimage. Generally, Murdoch refers to a pilgrimage because the moral life, in her view, is a matter of progress. As I discuss at length in a later section, moral perfection is an important part of understanding the moral pilgrimage because it is, in a certain way, its goal. For Murdoch, moral

perfection is infinite; it is a task that we never fully complete. The point of the moral life is endlessly engaging in this process, which involves a freeing from one's natural selfishness and an approaching of something other than oneself. As will become clear throughout the course of this chapter, Murdoch wants to emphasize that if we focus on really *seeing* – on getting our perceptions correct – the right actions will follow. Interestingly, moral activity does not happen when a person makes a choice; rather it is something that occurs in between choices. It involves a vision, whereby one is able to accurately see other people, and hence, act morally toward them.

Murdoch roots the spiritual pilgrimage in two different things, namely, what she refers to as an updated doctrine of original sin, and a kind of Platonic transition from appearances to reality. I shall discuss all of these points in detail in what follows. With this in mind, I am going to structure my account of Murdochian moral progress in terms of what it means to be a moral pilgrim. Before I begin, I need to make two points of clarification regarding the relevance of the first part of this chapter to my dissertation as a whole.

First, Murdoch specifically argues in both *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and in *The Sovereignty of Good*, that aesthetic experience plays a role in the process that she refers to as a moral pilgrimage; aesthetic experience begins our moral transition and transformation by teaching us how to keep our attention properly focused and, thus, to know, understand, and respect things quite distinct from and other than ourselves.

The ego, as I shall argue below, is the main obstacle that the Murdochian moral pilgrim faces. In a first approximation, Murdoch borrows the term 'ego' from Freud and she uses it in reference to a natural self-interestedness.<sup>99</sup> However, contemplation of art temporarily turns our

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<sup>99</sup> In the next section, I give an analysis of the connection between the ego and self-interestedness.

focus away from the ego, and, hence, it shows us that such a focus can be taken (MGM 65). Aesthetic experience begins the process by which we attempt to understand reality and truth. Eventually, this will be the topic of my discussion. Indeed, given the overall purpose of this dissertation, Murdoch's connection between aesthetic experience and morality is my main interest in this chapter. However, I need to begin with an account of Murdochian moral progress in order to lay the groundwork for my discussion of Murdoch's remarks on the connection between ethics and aesthetics.

Second, as I have pointed out, Murdoch thinks of moral progress as a pilgrimage, and this brings up some interesting, and perhaps unexpected, connections between her view and Plato's and Kant's. In his theory of moral progress, Plato did not specifically employ the notion of a pilgrimage.<sup>100</sup> However, Murdoch reads Plato with an eye to such a notion:

The moral life in the Platonistic understanding of it is a slow shift of attachments wherein looking (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy... The movement is not, by an occasional leap, into an external (empty) space of freedom, but patiently and continuously a change of one's whole being in all its contingent detail, through a world of appearance toward a world of reality (MGM 24).

Murdoch's reference to a certain kind of "energy" is interesting here. She explains that energy is

indeed a versatile and popular concept, as we see it in physics and in some philosophical thought. Ambiguous energy can be the virtuous impulse of the individual, the enlightened influx, the reward of spiritual attention, or it may be seen as the fundamental cosmic energy (ultimate particles, or history or *archi-écriture*) which dissolves both things and persons into some more basic reality (MGM 24)

She gives examples of sexual energy, which she says is spiritual energy, and Freud's libido as a kind of energy of the psyche. The point that is most pertinent to my discussion here is

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<sup>100</sup> Murdoch states: "In the Cave myth the Theory of Forms is presented as a pilgrimage where different realities or thought-objects exist for individual thinkers at different levels..." (MGM, 399).

that “our life-problem is one of the transformation of energy” (MGM 24). She claims that “Plato uses the concept of energy to explain the nature of moral change.” The thought is that energy “dissolves persons into a more basic reality” and this, she suggests, is what happens during a successful application of the Socratic Method. It is also what happens during successful moral education. She interprets Plato to mean that energy is magnetic attraction and that in the redeployment of energy lies individual salvation (MGM 24). This interpretation of Plato informs her own view that we must transform base egoistic energy into a higher, “spiritual” energy.

Thus, the point of the first passage above is that living a moral life involves a change of one’s whole being – a kind of Platonic transformation from illusion or appearance to reality. Murdoch wants to interpret this transformation as a pilgrimage, which, on her view, is a shift from attachments to the self to attachments outside oneself that results from a vision of reality.<sup>101</sup> She reads Plato’s myth of the cave as a description of such a pilgrimage:

Plato’s pilgrim is able, at various stages in his journey, his escape from the Cave, to construe the difference between the apparent and the real (MGM 62).<sup>102</sup>

Murdoch, in a kind of Platonic spirit, sees a moral pilgrimage as a quest by which we transition toward, and come to know, reality. Thus, though Murdoch’s moral theory is distinct from Plato’s, the Murdochian notion of a moral pilgrimage finds its roots in the ideas of Plato’s philosophy. The other philosopher who figures into this discussion is Kant.

Kant, like Plato, never uses the notion of a moral pilgrimage in his philosophy. However, it is interesting that in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant says that consciousness of the

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<sup>101</sup> I will discuss this at length below. Here I only intend to give a first approximation for the purposes of making this second point about the relevance of this section to my dissertation as a whole.

<sup>102</sup> She also refers to a Platonic Pilgrimage on pages 65, 74, and 174 of MGM. Furthermore, in *The Fire and the Sun* she writes: “The pilgrimage which restores our knowledge of this real world is explained in the *Republic* by the images of the sun and the quadripartite divided line, and by the myth of the cave” (FS 4).

moral law “strikes down self-conceit” (5:73) and “humiliates every human being when he compares it with the sensible propensity of his nature” (5:74). This awareness “deprives self-conceit of its illusion” and “it strikes down my pride” (CPrR 5:77). I have argued in the previous chapter that, for Kant, becoming moral involves being “enobled above” our inclinations. In particular, in Kant’s remarks on the connection between sublimity and morality, he makes evident that the reason the two are connected is that sublimity draws us outside ourselves – it directs one’s gaze away from her inclinations. Murdoch also argues that experiences of sublimity give rise to an adjustment of focus,<sup>103</sup> and she refers to this adjustment as ‘unselfing.’<sup>104</sup> While Kant would not want us to use the notion of a moral pilgrimage in connection with his theory, his discussion regarding the effects of an experience of sublimity strongly informs Murdoch’s theory of unselfing, which plays perhaps the most important role in the Murdochian Moral pilgrimage.

As I attempt to give an account of Murdoch’s moral theory, in terms of the Murdochian moral pilgrimage, I shall first discuss the point from which the pilgrimage begins. That is, I shall discuss Murdoch’s arguments regarding human nature. Then, I shall discuss the aim of the pilgrimage; I want to give an analysis of where exactly the pilgrim is headed. Finally, I shall give an account of the method that Murdoch suggests to the pilgrim as she tries to accomplish her task.

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<sup>103</sup> Murdoch argues that Kant’s understanding of the effects of an experience of sublimity is “near the mark,” but inadequate. She agrees that this sort of experience draws us away from our selfish desires, perhaps our inclinations toward immediate gratification or personal wants, but her worry concerns that toward which Kant thinks our focus is adjusted. He argues that we are made aware of our own power of reason, and Murdoch objects to this by arguing that we are instead drawn toward the realization of other people in all their particularities. I take this issue up in depth in Chapter 4.

<sup>104</sup> I discuss this in depth below.

## B. BEFORE THE PILGRIMAGE

Murdoch argues that “human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind” (SOG 51). I suggest that, by this, Murdoch means we are ‘naturally self-interested.’ The following passage is helpful here:

Are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly? (SOG 53)

Here she refers to the ‘energy of an egocentric kind’<sup>105</sup> that she talks about two pages prior as ‘an energy which is naturally selfish.’ The passage constitutes Murdoch’s formulation of what she insists is one of the main problems in moral philosophy. Indeed, as Murdoch sets up her moral theory, her central focus is on figuring out how to progress from our natural egotism, or as I am interpreting it, our natural self-interestedness. She wants to show that if we are going to come up with a good theory of moral progress, we need to find a method for dealing with the egocentric nature of humanity.

I want to leave aside for the moment a discussion of the method that Murdoch proposes as a solution. Instead, I shall focus more specifically on Murdoch’s understanding of egotism. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch writes, “In the moral life, the enemy is the fat relentless ego” (SOG 51). Then, she goes on to say that “the chief enemy of excellence in morality is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one” (SOG 57). Given these two passages, one can reasonably suppose that Murdoch means that the enemy of the moral life is both the ego and personal fantasy. I suggest that this can be explained as follows: the ego glorifies the self and belittles

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<sup>105</sup> Murdoch maintains that “what we really are seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between moments of choice” (SOG 53).



everything else – and fantasy just is “the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images” (SOG 65). Thus, it follows that fantasy is egotistic. Interestingly, Murdoch makes this claim directly in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (MGM 86). She goes on there to also say that the ego is “illusion-making” and a liar (MGM 86). With this in mind, there is sufficient reason to believe that her understanding of the ego and its relationship with fantasy is consistent between these texts. Even so, one might still ask why it is that we have reason to believe that human conduct is moved by the ego. In both *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch turns to Freud to substantiate her answer to this question (MGM 20-21, and SOG 51-52). In her view of human nature, she draws on two notions – Freudian psychology and the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin – in order to give an idea of the initial selfish stage of our moral progress; that is, to characterize the point at which we start the pilgrimage. More specifically, Murdoch adopts something like the Christian notion that sin is a universal aspect of humanity, but she argues that Freud helps us understand this notion. In her view, he made an “important discovery about the human mind.” The following passage from *The Sovereignty of Good* best sums up her point:

Modern psychology has provided us with what might be called a doctrine of original sin, a doctrine which most philosophers deny, or attempt to render innocuous. When I speak in this context of modern psychology, I mean primarily the work of Freud. I am not a ‘Freudian’ and the truth of this or that particular view of Freud does not here concern me, but...one may say that what [Freud] presents us with is a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasimechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings (SOG, 51).

Murdoch's emphasis in this passage on the ambivalence and confusion of our selfish aims is interesting. Her use of the term 'ambivalent' here seems to suggest that our natural motives are indeterminate, and perhaps, indecisive, or even incoherent. The point that "fantasy is a stronger force than reason," suggests that fantasy is irrational. This 'quasimechanical energy' along with the irrational and the incoherent all seem to be a part of the fantasy system that Murdoch describes.

Objectivity and unselfishness are, in the first instance, unnatural to us because we are self-focused. We are drawn to pursue our selfish fantasies because by nature we are all, in a certain sense, "fallen." By "original sin" here Murdoch means that we are born with selfish tendencies, and we need to be freed from our egos. We are naturally drawn to selfish attachments, by which she means things that we are drawn to because they gratify our egos. Our egos are attached to beliefs that paint the world in a way that is agreeable to us. However, this egotistic "lens," as it were, that we look through gives us a picture of the world that is merely a fantasy and illusion. Murdoch writes:

[The psyche] is predisposed to certain patterns of activity...its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain (SOG 78-79).

Our vision of the world is usually unclear and mistaken, as a result of this, and we must correct that vision. The task is to correct what it is that we value and that to which we are attached. In order to understand what Murdoch means by selfish attachments, fantasy, and illusion, it will be helpful to consider her own famous example of a mother relating to her daughter-in-law:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility toward her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly

common, certainly lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him (SOG 16-17).

Later, however, M – whom Murdoch tells us is capable of self-criticism, intelligent, etc. – tells herself, “I am old-fashioned and conventional, I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again” (SOG 17-17). M realized that her own interests might be getting in the way of her perception of D. This change in M's mind allows her to see that “D is not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous,” etc.<sup>106</sup>

For now, I am interested in one specific point regarding this example. Later, I shall return to it in order to discuss some of its richer elements (such as what changed in M when she was later able to see D correctly, and how, exactly, M was able to change). My main concern at this stage is to point out that M's change of mind allows her to have an altered vision of D, and what M saw before the altered vision was an illusion. M's illusory perception of D in the beginning was the result of her attachment to her son, her own pride, perhaps, and the status of her relationship with her son, e.g., we may suppose she did not want to stop being the most important woman in his life. In this example, then, Murdoch gives us an idea of what it means to have a selfish attachment, and hence, illusory perception. Indeed, M, in the beginning, exemplifies how it is that our natural egotism builds up “convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world” (SOG, 36). Thus, we need a kind of redemption from this state, as it were. We need

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<sup>106</sup> While there are cases in which people are truly vulgar or undignified, Murdoch is pointing to the sort of case where one person incorrectly judges someone as such because of her own egotistic desires/fantasies. That is the case in which judging a person as vulgar, etc., is wrong. In other words, we can correctly judge a person to be vulgar if that person really is that way, and if we are not making the judgment simply in virtue of the fact that it fulfills some egotistic desire of our own. On the other hand, if we incorrectly judge someone to be vulgar, etc., we need to correct that judgment. Murdoch's point is that an incorrect judgment of this kind results from an egotistic fantasy in which one is absorbed, and that correct judgment only occurs when one overcomes such fantasies.

to learn to become selfless, but that is difficult for us. Indeed we are “anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world” (SOG 82).

Murdoch makes two remarks that are very similar to this one in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: “Nothing is more evident in human life than fear and muddle, and the tumultuous agitation of the battle against natural egoism. The ego is ‘unbridled.’ Continuous control is required” (MGM 260), and then, “In real life, we have...the deep devious ingenuity of egotism, those ‘devices and desires of our own hearts’” (MGM 131). So, our natural tendencies must be continuously controlled, and we (like M) must defeat the selfish desires of our own hearts in order to see others accurately.

However, at this point, one might question why we have reason to believe that being egotistic is not good for a person. In what follows, I shall argue that Murdoch means to suggest that egotism is problematic to our moral progress because it inclines us to under-appreciate other people (SOG, 51-52); this under-appreciation of other people results in an under-appreciation of and lack of knowledge of reality. As I shall show in this section, gaining a vision of reality is that which facilitates our becoming good. Thus, the ego draws us to something that is not truly good for us (MGM 51). It prevents us from seeing, clearly and justly, the new possibilities that lie before us and from responding to the “good attachments and desires which have been in [the ego’s] eclipse” (MGM 323), and it presents us with falsehoods. This is detrimental to us because “*Truth* is important” (MGM 325). The good man “may see what is right without prolonged doubt or reflection, large because, being less egoistic, he can see more of life. (He returns to seeing, *really* seeing, rivers and mountains as rivers and mountains. He has fewer temptations.) Truth is very close to good” (MGM 325).

Since, due to our natural egotism – which I am arguing entails, for Murdoch, a natural self-interestedness – we mistakenly perceive the world around us, fallibility is built into our nature (SOG, 23). We need to correctly perceive the world around us so that we will not fail, i.e., seek that which is only apparently valuable. Specifically, we need correct perception in order to gain knowledge of what is truly valuable (MGM 331). For Murdoch, since egotism involves narrowly focusing on ourselves and overestimating our moral understanding of things outside ourselves,<sup>107</sup> egotism is the fundamental obstacle to our ability to know anything (which involves appreciating something other than that which gratifies our selfish attachments). If we do not overcome our egos and learn correct perception we will never gain knowledge. “The mind is indeed besieged or crowded by selfish dream life” (MGM 317), and this is why “it is a task to see the world as it is” (SOG, 91). This task is a moral one, and we must find a way to carry it out. I will return to the topic of how exactly Murdoch argues that we must do so in a later subsection, but at this point I want to consider where it is that the moral pilgrim is headed. In other words, I shall discuss the goal of the Murdochian moral pilgrimage.

### C. THE AIM OF THE PILGRIMAGE

In the previous section, I have shown that the Murdochian moral pilgrimage involves a transition from appearances to reality, and a shift from attachments to the self to attachments outside the self. This shift of attachments leads to a defeat of the ego, and hence, a vision of

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<sup>107</sup> By this I mean that the ego convinces us that there is no need to know anything else about other people, and that we need not focus our attention on them. After all, if we focus on others, we will focus less on ourselves, and that is contrary to what the ego seeks. Thus, the ego convinces us to accept the illusion that we are perceiving others correctly, but instead, all we are doing is feeding our egos. As I discuss at length in later sections of this chapter, Murdoch thinks we overestimate our moral understanding of other beings and that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others (S&G 52). Our moral obligation is recognizing and respecting, this otherness. However, in order to do so, we must defeat the ego and the illusions that it creates.

reality. I want to structure my discussion in this section in terms of the following question: What, exactly, is the aim of the Murdochian moral pilgrimage? I shall begin by looking at Murdoch's notion of reality.

In her essay, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," Murdoch states that our moral task is to recognize "a vast and varied reality outside ourselves" (SBR 283). One will likely wonder exactly what reality Murdoch has in mind. What is it to recognize this reality? Is it a matter of knowing other people, or knowing general principles of morality, or transcendent metaphysical facts, or something else?

I would argue that the answer to this question lies in the first essay in *The Sovereignty of Good*, "The Idea of Perfection." Therein, Murdoch suggests that knowing transcendent<sup>108</sup> moral reality is knowledge of things such as another individual's character, for instance, in the example of M and D, that D is "spontaneous" (SOG 17-18). She writes, "The central concept of morality is 'the individual' thought of as knowable by love, thought of in the light of the command, 'Be ye therefore perfect'" (SOG 29). This command refers to the idea that our thinking is governed by the notion that our knowledge of other individuals is infinitely perfectible (SOG 28-33). Murdoch gives her own take on this quotation, and in her view, being perfect is something of which we are able to possess an idea, yet it is also something that is unattainable. Murdoch insists that, due to our naturally selfish condition, we are inevitably imperfect. She argues that "since we are neither angels nor animals but human individuals, our dealings with each other have this aspect;" that is, they are imperfect because we are 'fallen,' as she puts it (SOG 27).

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<sup>108</sup> She defines 'transcendent' as "a good 'going beyond' one's egoistic self as in the Platonic Pilgrimage" (MGM 498).

However, we have an idea of what it is to be perfect, an idea of an “ideal limit of love or knowledge” (SOG 27). With an eye to Plato, Murdoch argues that this is because we are able to experience images and shadows of perfect truth and goodness.<sup>109</sup> In all sorts of cognitive activities (study, work, art) we learn to distinguish levels and gradations of goodness and badness. It is the whole of our experience that gives us evidence of the idea of perfection in the activity of truth-seeking. Murdoch states:

A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect... We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to ‘let by’... The idea of perfection works thus within a field of study, producing an increasing sense of direction (SOG 61-62).

This sense of direction toward an ideal is something that is rooted in a fundamental orientation toward the good as an ideal of consciousness. Consciousness discriminates among levels and degrees of goodness and it is led to seek goodness through the gradual apprehension of degrees of goodness in its environment. Indeed “We are always in motion toward or away from what is more real” (MGM 295). Hence, this activity is a pilgrimage from appearance to perfected knowledge of reality, and the idea of perfection is a principle of goodness within us that prompts our endless striving to reach an ideal limit.

Murdoch’s moral theory takes shape in her connection between the idea of perfection and the individual. Indeed, “love is knowledge of the individual” (SOG 27). Our moral task is just this: to really see other individuals. This is an endless task because “‘within,’ as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts

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<sup>109</sup> See Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thoughts of Iris Murdoch*, “The Reality of the Good: Murdoch’s Ontological Proof,” pp. 127

themselves are changing” (SOG 27). We are inevitably imperfect; the ideal limit of love and knowledge is always beyond us.

For Murdoch, moral reality is actually a world of people and things with individual qualities. However, this world is transcendent insofar as it has an unending complexity; its complexities go beyond whatever we may capture of it in any one moment. Furthermore, the concepts of the moral and the personal understanding in which we try to capture that transcendent world, themselves, have an unending depth: Our understanding of “concepts alter[s]; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty. A deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place” (SOG 28).

Our understanding of concepts may increase continually “in the direction of an ideal limit” (SOG 28). By an ideal limit, Murdoch means knowledge of a concrete universal<sup>110</sup> (SOG 29). On Murdoch’s view, moral concepts are to be considered concrete universals, and other non-moral concepts may be considered as such also: “Why not consider red as an ideal end point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love?” (SOG 29) The thought is that there is more to something like ‘spontaneity,’ ‘courage,’ or even ‘red,’ for example, than what is captured in our personal conceptions of it. Therefore, the depth in which we understand these concepts can always increase.

In connection with the thought that our concepts of the moral and the personal understanding in which we try to capture it can always increase, the moral task that Murdoch describes is an endless one: a person must always seek a better understanding of other individuals around her, and of the moral and the good. Yet, knowledge of such things is “beyond

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<sup>110</sup> I take it that Murdoch is referring to Hegel here: This term refers to something that has universal import and has individual effects in the world. This is a universal that denotes a concrete reality as opposed to a universal that denotes one thing in a class, e.g., mankind as opposed to man.



us.” Hence, a person might wonder what the point of Murdoch’s moral pilgrimage really is, and why it is worth doing. In other words, why take on a task that never ends and that can never be completely fulfilled? I suggest that Murdoch thinks we must take on this task because when we increase our knowledge of reality we become increasingly free; i.e., freedom is the aim of the Murdochian moral pilgrimage (SOG 37). Murdoch has a distinctive notion of freedom, and in what follows I shall try to give a brief analysis of it. In a first approximation, on Murdoch’s view, we are free when we do what we see as good – when we are no longer in conflict about it.<sup>111</sup>

More specifically, Murdoch’s view of freedom draws on that of Simone Weil, who argues that being free is “almost automatically” doing things that we see to be good. When we are free, “we no longer have a choice” (Weil, Notebooks 205, Murdoch, “Knowing the Void,” 159).<sup>112</sup> The thought is that once we do the moral work that the pilgrimage requires, the idea of a moral choice will no longer be present to us. We will simply take (and, in a sense, live) the moral point of view and, once we do so there will be no question as to whether or not we have behaved morally. Instead we will inevitably behave that way, and, for Murdoch, this is the ideal toward which we should strive.

Becoming free involves a process of continual activity whereby we build and adjust our picture of the moral character of people and things in the world. Indeed, freedom is a matter of progress in seeing justly and lovingly something that is infinitely perfectible. Murdoch writes,

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<sup>111</sup> Murdoch insists that we should recognize the importance of the internal reflection that is required in order to achieve a just view of another person’s moral character. Instead of seeing freedom as the exercise of choice, we should see the ideal form of freedom as something that we reach upon a progression of moral development. Freedom is found at a point at which choice disappears, and due to our developed ability to see justly and lovingly, we simply automatically do what is genuinely good. For more on this point, see Justin Brookes’ *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, pp. 37.

<sup>112</sup> One might argue that cases in which no choice is presented are not cases in which freedom can be present. Brookes examines 3 main objections to Murdoch and compares these with some of the reasons in support of Murdoch’s view that it is in fact possible to be free and not have a choice. See 53.

“Freedom is...simply a name of an aspect of virtue concerned especially with the clarification of vision and the domination of selfish impulse” (SOG 97). Murdoch’s view of freedom involves escaping from or defeating fantasy and illusion in order to clearly see the external world.<sup>113</sup> Freedom is the knowledge that we derive from accurate perception or clear vision (SOG 37). To be free is to see the world with justice and attentiveness, e.g., to see what is seen by the person who sees that D is not undignified but spontaneous. This is a matter of “refined and honest perception of what is really the case.”<sup>114</sup>

This “vision” is not merely a realization; rather it is a kind of “moral discipline” (SOG 37). The notion of vision involves ‘seeing’ other people clearly and justly, and I shall introduce three different notions to clarify what it means to truly *see* other people: (1) It is to see them from their own points of view, (2) to see them in a positive light, and (3) to see them as works in progress (MGM 250 & 503).<sup>115</sup> This is what M has done when she is able to accurately see D: She has looked at her justly and lovingly. The essence of morality is love, on Murdoch’s view, and love “is the perception of individuals” and “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (SOG 215). Thus, love is the discovery of reality. The realization of our destiny is realizing the “unutterable particularity of nature,” and as Murdoch puts it, the “most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man” (SOG 215).

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<sup>113</sup> In the next part of this chapter, I take up the question as to why Murdoch thinks that selfishness is a threat to freedom. See Section I, “Imagination and Fantasy” for a thorough discussion of this topic. Murdoch argues that freedom may be clarified by the contrast between fantasy and imagination, and she says that freedom “may also be defined in terms of the triumph of the imagination over fantasy” (MGM 326).

<sup>114</sup> This vision is shown in another individual’s mode of speech, silence, and choice of words. It is about noticing her assessments of others, her conception of her own life, and what she thinks is attractive, praiseworthy, or funny. See R.W. Hepburn and Iris Murdoch, “Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 30 (1956).

<sup>115</sup> I discuss this further in the next section.

The successful moral pilgrim is a person who continually does what M has done in her relationship with D. She is the person who has been freed by realizing the possibility of vision and the discovery of moral reality. She has recognized the importance of internal moral reflection, and the way in which it can be aimed at achieving a just view of another person in general; i.e., her needs, her particular situation. This is a matter of “really looking” – keeping one’s attention fixed upon reality and preventing it from “returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair” (SOG 89).

This brings us to another element in Murdoch’s theory of moral progress. Murdoch wants to show that the moral pilgrimage brings about what she calls ‘unselfing.’ By this she means an alteration of one’s consciousness by the perception of reality outside of selfish fantasy. Murdoch describes unselfing as follows:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then I suddenly observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (SOG 84).<sup>116</sup>

This experience is one of beauty in nature, and I shall discuss the role that beauty plays in unselfing in a later section. At this point, however, my focus is on unpacking the notion of unselfing. The idea is that during the abovementioned experience, the importance that one places on herself and her selfish attachments fades away. Her attention and focus is drawn away from her resentment and anxiety and instead toward something other than herself. This experience clears “our minds of selfish care” (SOG 82); unselfing is a transformation that is prompted by love whereby:

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<sup>116</sup> Since my aim here is to discuss where it is that the Murdochian moral pilgrimage leads, my reference to this passage is, for now, only aimed at bringing out the meaning of Murdoch’s term, ‘unselfing.’ In the next section, I shall return, in detail, to Murdoch’s account of the relationship between beauty and morality.

the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself. There are many aspects to this teaching: for instance, letting the beloved go with a good grace, knowing when and how to give up, when to express love by silence or clearing off (MGM 17).

Unselfing involves learning to relate to and perceive others in a morally correct way. In light of my arguments here as well as in sub-section II, in particular, we have reason to believe that the person who has been unselfed is the person who has been freed from her ego. This is the person who will learn moral perception. Thus, since love is the correct perception of others and “the realization that something other than oneself is real” (SOG 215), the successful moral pilgrim will be a person who has truly learned to love.

Before I close this section, there are three more points that deserve attention: (1) One might wonder whether Murdoch thinks we ought to love everyone. In other words, it would be reasonable to question whether Murdoch thinks it is the case that I need to develop a “just and loving gaze” toward someone who has committed a terrible evil, e.g., Hitler, a terrorist, a serial rapist, and so on. Must we look at evil lovingly? Murdoch’s remarks on this are unfortunately sparse. Keeping that in mind, I suggest the following potential answer: Murdoch’s goal is to convince us that we need to see others as they really are, and see them justly. The problem with failing to pay someone proper attention is that we tend to fabricate our own illusions about other people in order to satisfy our own egos. The reason we must practice attention is to justly – really – see other people as they truly are, aside from or without those egotistic fabrications. So, if a person really is crude, evil, malicious, or whatever and we give that person loving attention, we have done what we need to do, morally. We will see them as they are – crude, evil, malicious, whatever – but we have acted morally because we have not created illusions about that person. Murdoch does say that “love is knowledge of the individual” (SOG 27), so part of what it is to see an individual lovingly just is to know her; that is, to see her as she truly is. If I pay a

malicious, evil person loving attention, and I, therefore, see her as malicious and evil, then I am seeing her as she is. On the other hand, it would be immoral of me to fabricate illusions of a good, honest person as evil and malicious rather than attempting to see her justly – as she truly is. Perhaps Murdoch is taking a “pray for your enemies” sort of view. By this I mean that perhaps she wants us to love (truly know) even evil people, and also pay them the kind of attention that we pay the people that we love, or the kind of attention that we pay the most beautiful work of art. This kind of attention will, then, allow us see whatever value they may have. Indeed, she says that “human beings are valuable, not because they are created by God or because they are rational beings or good citizens, but because they are human beings” (MGM 365).

(2) It is interesting to notice that, while Murdoch insists that we must overcome our selfish attachments, our egos, our personal self-interestedness, she is not abstracting from all personal engagement. Indeed, love – the discovery of reality – is affective, and thus there is an affective element to the kind of vision that Murdoch advocates. When we try to really see other people in this Murdochian sense, our successful attempts to do so will involve love. Thus, I am arguing that it is necessary for the moral pilgrim to overcome certain affective parts of herself – her egotistical feelings and attachments – and that a transformation of her affective elements is a crucial aspect of a successful moral pilgrim, and thus, Murdoch’s moral theory.

(3) Another point that should be made here is that unselfing involves a kind of benevolence. That is, a person who has been unselfed will have developed an attitude of seeing human beings as they are, and she will do so not only because she is no longer focused egotistically on herself, but also because she is inevitably striving for perfection, i.e., for goodness. It is best to understand Murdoch to mean that the goal is to be able to see people each

as individual works in progress, just as we, ourselves, are, and to be supportive of them. Indeed, we are all “moving through a continuum within which we are aware of truth and falsehood, illusion and reality, good and evil. We are continuously striving and learning, discovering and discarding images” (MGM 250).

For Murdoch, moral change is a function of a progressive re-education of moral vision (MGM 177). I suggest that obtaining the vision that Murdoch describes means seeing the good in people and seeing how they should be focused, even regardless of whether they see that, themselves. No individual is perfect, and all individuals are naturally selfish, i.e., immoral. Everyone must work to achieve morality, and part of that achievement just is realizing that everyone else must also go through a process of development in order to overcome selfishness.

The Murdochian moral pilgrim, once she has completed her journey, will be free in the sense that she will no longer be focused on selfish illusions. She will truly and justly see reality, which is something a person can only perceive when she is no longer focusing solely on herself. Indeed, the “self is such a dazzling object that if one looks there, one may see nothing else” (SOG 31). Reality transcends us and we are prevented from seeing it when we focus only on ourselves. Freeing ourselves from the egotistic illusion that we are under will allow us to see what is real and true, including the truth about correct moral behavior.

At this point, one might raise a question regarding moral internalism:<sup>117</sup> Why, exactly, does correct seeing lead to moral behavior? In order to suggest an answer to this question, I shall need to consider the method that Murdoch suggests to the pilgrim as she tries to accomplish her task.

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<sup>117</sup> I address the topic of Internalism specifically in Chapter 5.

#### D. THE WAY

I have shown that, on Murdoch's view, the ego is the fundamental obstacle to an accurate perception of reality. Thus, the moral pilgrim must work to overcome this obstacle. It is a good question as to how this is possible, and in what follows, I shall give an analysis of Murdoch's answer.

Let us begin by returning to Murdoch's M and D example. When M has her change of mind, and is thus able to finally see D accurately, though – as Murdoch emphasizes – her outward behavior does not change, something *within* M does indeed alter. Indeed, Murdoch makes a point of noting that M's outward behavior is already all that it should be, and that it is, instead, something within M that changes. Here is the relevant passage once more:

The M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional, I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again' (SOG 17-17).

Murdoch's point that M is "well-intentioned" emphasizes the moral side of this example, and her point that M is "capable of self-criticism" emphasizes the fact that M wants to have a correct view of D – she wants to get it right, as it were. Indeed, it is important to notice here that M is prompted to reassess her view.<sup>118</sup> When she does so, "M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters." Murdoch insists that the change is not in D's behavior but in M's mind, and the change in M's mind allows her to see that "D is not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous," etc.

The metaphor of vision is suggested by this situation: "M *looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention" (SOG, 22, my italics). There is a progression that M goes through – it

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<sup>118</sup> I argue below that this prompting is caused by the idea of perfection.

is a struggle, and a process – that facilitates her seeing D clearly. That is, it gives her a kind of moral vision. Murdoch is using M’s activity as an example of moral activity; it is an example of attention aimed at an accurate perception. However, M, in attending to D, is trying to see D “justly or lovingly” and, hence, accurately; that is, M is exercising attention. Murdoch describes this notion as follows:

I have used the word ‘attention,’ which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent (SOG, 33).

Attention is that which adds the affective element to the kind of vision that M has had; that is, M’s change of mind and her ability to see D accurately involved love. It is important to notice that when M approaches D justly and lovingly, it happens between her choices: “M has been doing something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself. M has been morally active” (SOG, 19-20). M’s moral activity begins with her starting to question and investigate whether her impression of D has been correct. When she asks herself whether she is old-fashioned, prejudiced, or narrow-minded, she is investigating her thoughts, her feelings, and her motives for having the perception of D that she has. Perhaps it is jealousy that is motivating her to have a false perception of D. Murdoch means to draw out the point that M questions her motives and she then exercises attention on D. Attention is the key; the “just and loving gaze directed upon individual reality” is what grounds M’s discovery about D and her new, moral behavior towards D.

Learning to exercise attention is the way in which one may overcome the obstacle that the ego presents us with. Though we tend to be selfish, and unselfishness is difficult to obtain, the answer – the solution – to this problem (and the redemption and healing, as it were, of the



fallen human being) lies in “an exercise of justice and realism and really looking” (SOG 89).

However, how does a person learn to do this?

Murdoch suggests that study, art, and prayer are all examples of things that can teach us this moral spirit and cultivate our capacity to exercise it as we grow older. In this sense, these disciplines play a role in our moral progress, and it is in this way that we endure a process by which we learn respect for something other than ourselves. Murdoch writes:

Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend to know what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory (SOG, 87).

This kind of discipline gives us an ability to forget ourselves because it demands of us that we pay attention to something independent and outside us. Indeed, Murdochian attention always takes on something independent and real as its object. This independent reality can be anything that exists outside the perceiver’s mind, but the quintessential example is an individual person. Interestingly, attending to Russian and attending to another individual do seem to require different things. For example, when I study another language I do indeed let the subject matter govern me in a certain sense. That is, when I am really concentrating, I become absorbed in the subject matter, and it takes me away from my usual concerns. (I am also drawn here to think about the way I ‘attend to’ the subject matter in this dissertation.) When we focus on learning Russian or doing philosophy or engaging in a task of a similar sort, we do not impose ourselves upon it. Rather it takes our full attention and we become absorbed in it: we become attached to it in a certain sense. When I attend to another individual I still take on this attitude of being drawn away from myself and my concerns, but I must also take on a loving and just attitude.

This just and loving attitude is an important element in the context of Murdochian moral theory, but one might wonder whether it is extended to the context of intellectual disciplines. That is, does one take on a loving attitude toward Russian when she studies it? I would argue that Murdoch's arguments in *The Sovereignty of Good* suggest that, while an intellectual discipline can enable the mind to perceive the reality that transcends our selfish focus, and while it can teach honesty and humility by showing us the limits of our current knowledge, the degree to which it can teach us the proper moral attitude is limited. In particular, it is limited in comparison with an experience of art. Murdoch insists that it is in the context of art that we are given the most fitting experience in which to defeat the self. Indeed, Murdoch says that art is "the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen" (SOG 87-88). I suggest that this is, in part, because art involves an affective element, which is something that I have argued is crucial to Murdochian moral theory. Indeed:

Art and morals are one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality (S&G 215).

Art involves love, just as moral activity does. If we want to be moral, we must learn to exercise the same kind of attention toward other people that we exercise toward art, in particular, and this is what M did in order to change her view of D.<sup>119</sup> To expand on this point, when I attend to another individual, I take on an attitude of seeing that individual as she truly is. I will grasp the sense in which she is relevantly different from me at any given time (perhaps the person has experienced racism or sexism that I have not experienced, or perhaps the person has a love for something that I do not.) Murdoch writes:

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<sup>119</sup> Again, I shall discuss the connection between experiences of beauty, art and morals more specifically in the next section of this chapter.

The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing. (SOG 66)

When I exercise attention, I realize that the person is both real as herself, and separate from myself. I realize that this person is not an extension of myself, but rather, has his or her own needs. Ironically, being separate – being a separate center of concerns and source of value – involves being like me insofar as I am also a center of concerns and source of value. However, also, and even more importantly, I am arguing that exercising attention means that I see the other person from her own point of view. That is, I see her in a positive light and as she truly is. This kind of seeing translates into action: once I see the other person correctly, I no longer treat her as a pawn in my own selfish, fantasy-driven version of reality that I have constructed. I mean to suggest that when I stop treating the other person as a pawn, as it were, a change in my (at least inward) behavior occurs.

Indeed, in the example, M finally sees D as she really is. I suggest that this means she sees her in a positive and supportive light, and as a work in progress; she sees the good side of her. When M sees this, M is able to see that she has been wrong – she realizes that D is not simply an extension of herself; e.g., that D doesn't only have value insofar as she is related to M as her son's wife.

I would argue that this is what Murdoch means by a just and loving perception of another person, in all of that person's particularity and complexity; learning to attend to other individuals is learning to really see the good in another person, and to see that person not simply as an extension of oneself. Indeed, for Murdoch, the main moral aim is learning to focus on something other than oneself:

It is... a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps the idea of goodness itself. Human beings are naturally attached and when an attachment seems painful or bad it is most readily displaced by another attachment, which an attempt at attention can encourage (SOG 55).

Murdoch means that we have a natural ability and tendency toward attachments, and toward altering or replacing those attachments with others when they bring about discomfort. Attention can encourage this sort of switching or replacing of attachments in a positive manner insofar as it can prompt us to replace egotistical attachments and with attachments to something outside ourselves. This will allow us to see reality as it truly is, rather than through the distorted perspective of the ego. Focusing our attention on valuable things outside ourselves works to undo, as it were, the hold that the ego naturally has on a person.

We are now ready to return more specifically to the question as to why correct seeing leads to moral behavior. I have shown that that moral perception is and results from exercising attention. To attend is to approach something with a just and loving gaze; that is, to try to perceive it in its unbounded particularity and complexity –as it truly is. To attend is to take on an infinitely perfectible activity (SOG 28). Attention gives rise to true perceptions of its objects insofar as the virtues of love, justice, honesty, courage, humility, and tolerance are exercised.<sup>120</sup>

However, there is another element at work in the process that I have been describing, and that element is the Good.<sup>121</sup> At the beginning of this section, I quoted Murdoch's remark that "life is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of truth" (MGM 14).

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<sup>120</sup> See Bridget Clarke's "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception" pp. 236.

<sup>121</sup> Murdoch is elusive on this point because she is trying to respect the "genuine elusiveness of the Good itself." She argues that the Good is indefinable in nature, "we cannot get it taped... It always lies beyond" (OGG 62). However, Bridget Clarke sheds some light on this in "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception," as does Maria Antonaccio in *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thoughts of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Murdoch means to suggest, here, that there is something pulling us toward becoming better. As naturally self-interested beings we are inevitably imperfect and the Good prompts us to remedy that. Murdoch writes:

The proof of the necessity or unique status of good runs through our grasp of an idea of perfection which comes to us in innumerable situations, where we are trying to do something well or are conscious of failure. Kant rightly suggests that there is often a unique ‘feel’ about such situations...What is perfect must exist, that is, what we think of as goodness and perfection, the ‘object’ of our best thoughts, must be something real, indeed especially and most real, not as contingent, accidental reality but as something fundamental, essential and necessary (MGM 430).

With this in mind, Murdoch wants to show that that attention is guided by the Good, and attending entails approaching a perfect perception; that is, when one attends, one is prompted to seek a perfect perception of the objects she encounters. The desire for a better perception necessarily brings with it an ideal goal, the notion of perfect perception. This is why attention, which involves “a just and loving gaze upon an individual reality,” prompts investigation and correction: it is bound up with a striving for perfection. Attention allows us to approach perfect perception, so attending is seeing the world in its moral aspect on the basis of qualities of character. It is also realizing that one has not yet seen as clearly as she might.<sup>122</sup> Murdoch writes: “As soon as we begin to use words such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’ in characterizing M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is, the idea of perfection” (SOG, 23).

In the M and D example, something is pulling M toward becoming better. She is not comfortable settling with her current perception of D because she has a need<sup>123</sup> to seek better

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<sup>122</sup> See Clarke, pg. 236

<sup>123</sup> For Murdoch, we have a common impetus to see individual realities clearly, over and against our egoistic impulses. However, the content or details of our attempts may differ amongst us. Yet, the idea of perfection is the common source which prompts our individual attempts to see other individuals as they are, and thus, to act morally.

perceptions and to perfect her view. It is this that gives M critical questions to ask about herself and her perceptions of D; the Good, insofar as it embodies the idea of perfection, prompts M to consider whether D is really juvenile and whether she herself is just being jealous or old-fashioned. Notably, Murdoch wants to show that the Good furnishes these sorts of questions, but it does not furnish the answers. This is important because having the right questions, and having to seek out their answers, is an indispensable element in the development of the character that a person needs if she is to learn to answer those very questions correctly. This point requires some unpacking.

It will be helpful to consider the following example, in a separate context: When one learns the art of horsemanship, one will be told that she must sit up straight in order to master the art and communicate with the horse correctly. As the person hones her skills, and as she directs the horse about and tries to exercise proper horsemanship, she will (in a certain sense) be asking herself ‘am I sitting up straight?’ She does not know the answer at first because she will be focusing so hard on directing the horse about that it will be difficult for her to determine the state of her posture. However, she will later – after practicing and continuing to check herself and ask herself whether she is sitting up straight – come to do so naturally and will come to recognize when she is doing so. At this later point, she will have become a good horseperson, and hence, she will be able to answer to the question “Am I sitting up straight?” The thought that I am trying to get across is that one needs to be a good horseperson to correctly answer the questions relevant to horsemanship: she needs to have mastered the art of horsemanship in order to get to a point where she is capable of recognizing whether she is sitting up straight while riding.

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Bridget Clarke (“Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception,” pg. 243) argues that “Whether one is trying to understand another person, on [Murdoch’s] account, one is guided by the sense that there is something beyond what one’s current lights reveal to one, that there is more to be understood.” Murdoch identifies this sense of perfection with a principle of Good that is both elemental and indefinable (SOG 90).

However, it is asking the question “Am I sitting up straight?” in the first place that allows one to develop the skills that she needs to master the art. In other words, asking the question is necessary for learning good horsemanship.<sup>124</sup>

Similarly, one must engage in the practice of asking the question “Am I perceiving X individual correctly?” in order to get to a point where she is capable of recognizing when she has or has not done so – to get to the point where she can answer the question. Thus, again, asking the right question is an indispensable element in mastering the art, which, in this case, is perceiving other people correctly. So, M underwent a process of question and answer (just like the one the horseperson underwent in the example above) when the Good prompted her to question her perception of D.

However, as I have shown, becoming a moral person is an endless task. Thus, M should never be satisfied with her perceptions of other individuals. Indeed, to attend to something is to engage in an infinitely perfectible activity (SOG, 28). The moral life “is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrences of explicit moral choices.” Since exercising attention is something that occurs continually, not merely during the moment in which one faces a moral dilemma or choice, Murdoch argues that it is what happens in between our choices that is crucial (SOG, 36).

This is why Murdoch maintains that morality should not be confined to questions of external behavior; rather, in her view, we should speak of it in terms of internal moral reflection that is aimed at obtaining a just and loving view of another person. Furthermore, the notion of freedom comes into her view of morality because – like the horseperson who automatically

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<sup>124</sup> Bridget Clarke presents a version of this example in “Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception.”

recognizes whether or not she has good posture after continually practicing the art – we will “almost automatically” behave morally after we have continually practiced attention (the idea of perfection, when paired with the practice of attention, gives rise to moral activity). This involves a process of building and adjusting our pictures of the moral character of people and things in the world. Just as the horseperson who has mastered the art of horsemanship (and hence who has asked the right questions) will be able to direct the horse more tactfully and better enjoy her experience on the horse, the person who eventually – via practice – automatically does what she sees to be good will be freed from her illusory perceptions. This is the moral work that we do, and it is continual, endless activity – the activity of attention. As Murdoch puts it, “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at” (SOG 40).

#### **E. THE REALITY OF THE GOOD**

The good plays a central role in Murdoch’s philosophy, and it first appears in her work in *The Sovereignty of Good*. In that book, Murdoch presents the good as a guide to the moral life and as an ultimate reality. She returns to an extended discussion of the topic 22 years later in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. In Murdoch’s view, the good – like all moral values – is discovered via everyday life; recognizing the good just is a part of everyday life. Murdoch insists that, regarding the way in which one discovers the good, “there is no complicated and secret doctrine” (SOG 74). However, Murdoch scholars tend to agree that it is difficult to define what Murdoch means by ‘the good,’ particularly because of the “unsystematic presentation of her ideas and the difficulty of the issues being considered.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See Elizabeth Burns, “Iris Murdoch and the Nature of Good,” *Religious Studies*, pp. 303. Also see Heather Widows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*, “The Good,” pp. 71.



Part of the lack of definition results from Murdoch's point that the good lies beyond what we can know as human beings. We see instances of it, but we cannot (analytically or concretely) define it. This is because the moral life – the Murdochian moral pilgrimage, which is a constant attempt to see the good more clearly – is a lifelong task. However, Murdoch insists that some aspects of the good can be known: "We ordinarily conceive and apprehend goodness in terms of virtues which belong to a fabric of being" (SOG, 30). This is a mysterious passage, which I shall try to clarify as I proceed in this section.

However, at this stage it is important to note a certain worry that may arise from this general characterization of the Murdochian good: To suggest that the good lies beyond what we can know, and also that we "ordinarily conceive and apprehend it" seems odd, at the least. My aim in this section is to attempt to explain what Murdoch means by this, as well as to shed light on Murdoch's general discussion of the good.

i. THE MURDOCHIAN GOOD

In order to signify the way in which the good can be relevant to human beings, and yet is also "unique" and "above being," Murdoch presents the good as both transcendent and immanent (MGM 399). While she recognizes that this may be controversial, she insists that the "idea of good, perceived in our confused reality, also transcends it" (MGM 405). This means that the good "lives as it were on both sides of the barrier and we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations" (SOG, 93). Heather Widows sheds light on this point:

Murdoch uses the term 'transcendent' in the Aristotelian sense, namely that of transcending the categories. Good is transcendent in that it is never

contained in a single object or action which one would describe as good, but always exceeds the confines of a particular situation...It is the 'ideal end-point'. 'Transcendent,' used in this context, does not have supernatural connotations, in that the good is not other-worldly, or dependent upon any 'thing' or 'being' outside the human world. Rather, it is a reality in the world and transcendence is part of its nature.<sup>126</sup>

Murdoch insists that the good is also immanent, and it is through immanence that the good can be known. The "idea of good (goodness, virtue) crystallises out of our moral activity" (MGM, 426). So, a kind of recognition of the good is part of the experience of goodness in daily life, and each time a person experiences goodness that experience points to an ideal good. Interestingly, she notes that "there is...something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things which automatically suggests that 'there is more than this'" (SOG, 73). This, she says, is a "spark of insight,"<sup>127</sup> but it should not be interpreted in any kind of theological way. Rather, it should be interpreted as pointing to the good and reality (the real). The good is "an idea, an ideal, yet it is also evidently and actively incarnate all around us" (MGM, 478). In a way the transcendent is recognizable in its immanent aspects because "what is fundamental here is ideal or transcendent, never fully realized or analysed, but continually rediscovered in the course of the daily struggle with the world" (MGM 427).

In order to further explain this transcendent and immanent good, Murdoch encourages the reader to think of Plato's allegory of the cave. She explains that in Plato's description, the good is unique and "above being", but it also "fosters our sense of reality, as the sun fosters life on earth" (MGM 399). The good, analogous with the sun, is beyond – it is transcendent – but it can have influence and be known on an immanent level. Murdoch insists that "we do really know a certain amount about the Good and about the way it is connected with our condition" (SOG, 97).

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<sup>126</sup> Widows, pg. 72

<sup>127</sup> She insists that this "spark is real, [and] that great art is evidence of its reality" (SOG 73).

In short, Murdoch is rejecting a division between transcendence and immanence when it comes to the good. If we accept this move, then the notion that the good lies beyond what we can know and yet we “ordinarily conceive and apprehend it” can be explained insofar as the good transcends our confused reality, but it is also – in a Platonic sense – present in that confused reality in a kind of shadow-form, as it were.

Murdoch gives two main arguments in support of the reality of the good. It is important to note that Murdoch means for these two arguments to work together. The first argument might be called ‘the argument from perfection.’ The second is her version of the ontological argument. Via these arguments, Murdoch sets out a kind of defense of her position. However, she insists that the main evidence for her view comes mainly from one’s own experience. Let us first consider the argument from perfection.

ii. MURDOCH’S ARGUMENT FROM PERFECTION

The term ‘perfection’ is, of course, a key in this first argument, and, interestingly, Murdoch maintains that the meaning of this term points to the sort of relationship that she is advocating between immanence and transcendence. Murdoch explains that the term ‘perfect’ is a comparative one; i.e., it can only be used in contrast with that which is imperfect (and vice versa). The perfect is never reached by human beings, and it is, therefore, only an idea. Even so, the idea of perfection allows us “to see that A...is really better than B” (SOG 62). The comparative nature of this idea is such that “we learn of perfection and imperfection through our ability to understand what we see as an image or shadow of something better which we cannot yet see” (MGM 405). The thought is that we can see how something (e.g. a particular situation) can be better; we can see that it is lacking and needs something more. This idea of something

that is lacking gives us, on the other hand, the idea of something that lacks nothing. That we can compare and contrast in this way suggests that we intuit what is not already present or visible to us insofar as “we know of perfection as we look upon what is imperfect” (SOG 472).

We cannot fully understand or even have knowledge of perfection, but “we are not usually in doubt about the direction in which good lies” (SOG, 97). In Murdoch’s view, this notion of direction toward perfection, as it were, suggests that the good is real. That is, in recognizing distorted/imperfect instantiations of goodness, the perfect good is revealed. The following remark from *Widows* is helpful here:

This transcending order of perfection is “characteristic of morality,” for it is only in the light of perfection – which for Murdoch means what is perfectly good – that ‘better’ alternatives can be judged. Because perfection is not attainable, but always lies beyond and transcends any particular instance, it provides an ideal, a standard against which particulars can be assessed.<sup>128</sup>

For Murdoch, perfection is something that functions in all areas of human activity. To gain understanding in any area of life “involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often the revelation of there being in fact little that is good and nothing that is perfect” (SOG, 61). This happens in the moral context insofar as “we come to perceive scales, distances, standards and may incline to see as less than excellent what previously we were prepared to ‘let by’” (SOG, 61).

The unattainability of perfection inspires us, Murdoch argues, since the idea of it “moves and changes us...because it inspires love” (SOG, 62). Perfection is ‘beyond,’ as it were, but it has a kind of authority over us: “for all our frailty the command ‘be perfect’ has sense for us” (SOG, 93). Since perfection is absolute and since it lies in one direction rather than the other, it

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<sup>128</sup> *Widows*, pg. 76

provides our knowledge of the reality of the good. Thus “morality, goodness, is a form of realism” (SOG, 59), and we can see this through the universal applicability of perfection.

Murdoch’s vision of a moral realism is one which hinges on the concept of good, and, in her view, the good is that which connects the virtues. This is proved by experience, Murdoch argues, since “if we reflect upon the nature of the virtues we are constantly led to consider their relation to each other. The idea of an ‘order’ suggests itself, although it might be difficult to state this in any systematic form” (SOG, 57). This reveals the meaning of Murdoch’s remark at SOG, 30 that “we ordinarily conceive and apprehend goodness in terms of virtues which belong to a fabric of being”: The good connects the virtues in a certain kind of unity, which we can apprehend as we reflect on our own experiences. This is the way in which we see their relation with one another.

To be clear, Murdoch does not mean to suggest a permanent, strict hierarchy among virtues; rather, she sees an implicit connection by which virtues are related because they all are connected with goodness. In Plato’s footsteps she writes:

[Plato] never in fact anywhere expounds a systematic unitary view of the world of forms, though he implies that there is a hierarchy of forms... what he does suggest is that we work with the idea of such a hierarchy insofar as we introduce order into our conceptions of the world through our apprehension of Good (SOG, 95).

Indeed a kind of formal hierarchy is not possible because “the scene remains disparate and complex beyond hopes of any system, yet at the same time the concept of Good stretches through the whole of it and gives it the only kind of shadowy unachieved unity which it can possess” (SOG, 97). In Murdoch’s view, we are inspired by the good (as perfection), in part, because it is unattainable. Thus, the good – which is shown via the concept of perfection in

experience – is real in and motivating in human life. This first stage in Murdoch’s discussion of the good brings us to the idea of perfection as a necessary part of our thinking. The second stage is aimed at proving the objective existence of the good.

iii. MURDOCH’S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF THE GOOD

Murdoch’s version of the ontological argument is aimed at grounding the reality of the good as something more than merely an idea or concept. This argument – like the argument from perfection – involves a sort of scale of goodness. In short, Murdoch reproduces St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument for the existence of God, but she argues that while this argument does not prove the existence of God, it proves the existence of the good.

One will recall that Anselm’s main thesis is that if a Supreme Being or Greatest Possible Being can be conceived to exist, then it necessarily exists in reality. In virtue of the idea of ascension from lesser to greater, Anselm argues that a being that exists only in the mind is lesser than one that exists also in reality. Therefore, if we are talking about the greatest possible being as something that exists in the mind, it must also exist in reality. A key aspect of the argument is that in virtue of being the *greatest*, this being necessarily exists in reality. The idea of necessary existence is one that only applies to the Supreme Being, Anselm claims. The idea of this being is derived from experiences of goodness. He suggests that “by ascending from the lesser good to the greater, we can form a considerable notion of a being than which a greater is inconceivable.”

Anselm’s argument has been met with various criticisms, including Kant’s ‘existence is not a predicate’ objection, and, as Murdoch notes, Schopenhauer’s remark that the argument is “a charming joke” (MGM, 392). However, Murdoch revisits Anselm’s proof, arguing that the

concept of ‘necessary existence’ should be further explored. She turns to Norman Malcolm, who claims – in company with Anselm – that ‘God’ is different from other concepts. With this in mind, Murdoch suggests that it would make sense to assert that if God exists, then he always existed, and that if the concept of God is not to be self-contradictory, God must necessarily exist (MGM 410).

However, Murdoch argues that ‘necessary existence’ cannot be appropriately applied to the Christian God. She suggests that this is because “the concept of an existing personal being is too deeply embedded in the traditional idea of God” (MGM, 425); yet, if God necessarily exists, then he cannot be “a particular, a contingent thing, one thing among others” (MGM, 395). In her view, necessary existence cannot be applied to God, but it can be applied to the good. She argues: “what is in question...is something unique, of which the traditional idea of God was an image or metaphor and to which it has certainly been an effective pointer” (MGM, 412). The correct interpretation of Anselm’s argument is, according to Murdoch, that it grounds the “necessity and sovereignty of the Good” (MGM, 425). This emerges from Anselm’s description of our conception of God in the ‘degrees of good’ argument. Murdoch’s argument from perfection is similar to Anselm’s statement that we “recognize and identify goodness and degrees of good, and are thus able to have the idea of a greatest conceivable good” (MGM 395). In Murdoch’s view, the argument from perfection coupled with her version of the Ontological argument – her argument that if the good exists as an idea it must also exist in reality – shows that there is real objective content of the perfect good. She suggests that the Ontological Argument was always really about the existence of the good and moral value, which comes from “our most general perceptions and experience of the fundamental and omnipresent (uniquely necessary) nature of moral value, thought of in a Christian context as God” (MGM, 396).

Murdoch concludes that the ontological argument for the good, as she interprets it, addresses the problem of explaining “the idea of goodness in terms which combine its peculiar purity and separateness (its transcendence) with details of its omnipresent effectiveness in human life” (MGM, 408). In her view, pursuing the good in this world just is loving the best thing that can be.

However, Murdoch stresses that she does not mean to replace God with good. The good, she suggests, is like God insofar as it provides “a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessary real object of attention” (SOG, 55). The good is “above the level of gods or God,” she states, because it is non-personal and indifferent to human aims and pains (MGM, 475). The good does not console us, nor does it seek us, and because of this impersonal nature of the good it is a better focus for our attention: Indeed, in her view, we must “love the good for nothing” (MGM, 344). There must be no other motive for being good, no reward or punishment (for not being good) so that the moral life is pure. Thus, Murdoch insists that “good is not the old God in disguise, but rather what the old God symbolized” (MGM, 428). In a way, she means that eliminating the personality of God allows for the reality of good. On this analysis, her argument is that God cannot play the role that the good can. The good captures an aspect of the way in which we look at the world when we value things, and this is the aspect of looking that Murdoch aims to capture.

#### iv. THREE OBJECTIONS

In what follows, I note that there are at least three important worries regarding Murdoch’s Ontological Argument: (1) Murdoch’s main intention in giving her version of the Ontological Argument is to ground the ontological status of the good, and to ground its reality. Her view



requires that the good exist in some absolute sense. However, her ontological argument is especially confusing insofar as she wants to exclude the possibility of the good being an object, because something that is an object cannot have necessary existence. (This is part of her reason for asserting that the proof works for good and not God.) However, at other times she refers to the good as an ‘object of attention’ and even ‘the best object of attention.’

One way to explain this might be that Murdoch does not mean that an ‘object of attention’ is an object in a material sense. Indeed, she says that “in an important sense, goodness must be an idea” (MGM, 478). When she refers to the good as an object of attention, perhaps she means that it is an end-point or fixed point that is real in our systems of value, experiences, and conceptions of the world. Even if this is so, there are other problems that arise.

(2) A related worry is that Murdoch promotes the existence of the good (vs. God) insofar as it is a “better focus for our attention.” She argues that this is the case because we must love good for nothing. The good is a better fit as the ultimate purpose and end point because it does not seek us, she claims. “God sees us and seeks us, the good does not” (MGM 83). While the good does not have personal qualities such as the ability to see and seek, Murdoch does argue that it has the ability to magnetically “pull” at us. Perhaps it is a good question as to whether, when the end aim and purpose is the good, a person practices attention in order to produce something perfect, or to eventually become perfect. In either case, this would mean that she is not practicing attention toward the good for *nothing*. To clarify my point, when Murdoch says “for nothing,” she means that a person is practicing disinterested (in the Kantian sense) attention. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that one might practice disinterested attention toward God. (Indeed, Murdoch derives her very notion of attention from Simone Weil, who presented it as a characteristic of prayer: “[Prayer] is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is

capable toward God.”<sup>129</sup>) However, if one is going to argue that it is not possible to practice disinterested attention toward God, it really is not yet clear why it is, on the other hand, possible to practice disinterested attention toward the good instead.

(3) Some scholars have argued that Murdoch adopts a very narrow interpretation of Christianity. Critics have suggested that Murdoch – in her discussion of the Ontological argument – does not clearly understand the Christian notion of God, and has not really succeeded in distinguishing God and Good. Furthermore, it is questionable whether or not she has in fact replaced God with Good. Some critics will even argue that if her ontological argument works for the existence of the good, it also works for the existence of God.<sup>130</sup> Heather Widows explains that

given the place [Murdoch] allots to religion and to religious thinking, theologians are underrepresented in her work. Although this does not undermine her whole thesis, her lack of familiarity with theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas, and with different schools of thought, such as Christian Platonism, does lead her into error. As a result, she has misconstrued the ways in which God is conceived, and hence simplified the Christian view of God almost to the point of caricature. Consequently, Murdoch wrongly describes God as an object, and attributes to believers elements of belief and practice which many would find unacceptable, especially believers at the mystical end of the spectrum.<sup>131</sup>

With these criticisms in mind, I have called into question whether what has been proved to exist via Murdoch’s ontological argument should really be called ‘good’ instead of ‘God.’ The argument does at least help to clarify what Murdoch means by the good. However, one may wonder if she might have been better able to advance her position if she had avoided Anselm’s argument altogether. The point she wants to make – that good is a key part of experience (SOG,

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<sup>129</sup> See Weil, *Waiting for God*, (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973)

<sup>130</sup> See Widows, pg. 83

<sup>131</sup> Widows, pg. 83

42, 93) – can still be made, especially in virtue of her argument from perfection. This argument is better suited for grounding her realism and it avoids the issue of the good being interpreted as an empirical, material object.

Thus, while the role that the Murdochian good plays in the moral pilgrimage is fairly clear (it is in everyday life, “in efforts of attention directed upon individuals and of obedience to reality as an exercise of love” that the good is shown), providing a clear definition and clear picture of the ontological status of the Murdochian good is difficult. I shall suggest a way in which this difficulty might be resolved, when I present my own view in Chapter 5.

## **Part II: Imagination, Beauty, and Tragedy in Murdochian Aesthetics**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In the previous section, I gave an account of Murdochian moral progress, which involved an analysis of the moral pilgrimage that she describes. I briefly touched on the role that aesthetic experience plays in that pilgrimage. Thus, in this section, my general aim is to examine Murdoch’s remarks concerning the connection between ethics and aesthetics more closely. Murdoch specifically argues, in both *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and *The Sovereignty of Good*, that aesthetic experience begins our moral transformation by teaching us how to keep our attention properly focused and, thus, to know, understand, and respect things quite distinct from and other than ourselves. In what follows, I shall give an analysis of Murdoch’s view that aesthetic experience facilitates the attitude that is necessary to the morally ideal way of relating to the world. First, I shall consider Murdoch’s discussion of the imagination. Then, I shall examine her theory of beauty and then her theory of beauty in art, in particular. Finally, I shall

discuss her arguments regarding the art of tragedy, specifically, in preparation for a discussion that will follow in the fourth section of this chapter.

## **B. IMAGINATION AND FANTASY**

One element of Murdoch's philosophy that I have not yet discussed is her view of the imagination. As will become clear throughout this section, the imagination plays a role both in Murdoch's theory of moral progress and in her theory of aesthetic experience. The two main texts in which Murdoch discusses the imagination are *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. In the latter text, Murdoch describes imagination as a "searching, joining, light-seeking, semi-figurative nature of the mind's work, which prepares and forms the consciousness for action," and also as "an activity of the senses, a picturing and grasping, a stirring of desire" (MGM 323 & 325).

Murdoch insists that, when discussing the imagination, we need to distinguish two concepts: First, there is 'fantasy,' which is "untruthful," "egoistic," and is the source of base-level illusions. There is also 'truth-seeking creative imagination' which she describes as "truthful and free" (MGM 321). Both of these forms of imagination are relevant to morality, but fantasy is relevant in a negative sense and truth-seeking creative imagination is relevant in a positive sense. In Murdoch's view, we need creative imagery to grasp reality because perception, in certain situations, requires creativity. At MGM 320, Murdoch argues that truth-seeking creative imagination can point us to the reality that is overlooked or missed in the context of egotistically driven life. It is, therefore, an instrument of moral progress.

Fantasy is also a creative activity, but it is different from the other form of imagination in terms of the way in which it is motivated. That is, fantasy is motivated by the ego, so it aims at sheltering the subject. For example, neurotic fantasies, erotic fantasies, delusions or dreams of power are all examples of this. Since these activities (of fantasy) are all aimed at sheltering or consoling the subject, they prevent the acquisition of knowledge and virtue, which we have seen involves unselfing in Murdoch's view. Truth-seeking creative imagination,<sup>132</sup> on the other hand, does not misuse creativity in the way that fantasy does. Thus, 'fantasy' is a term for pretending or constructing false images (MGM 321), whereas 'imagination' is the capacity of "freely and creatively exploring the world, moving toward the expression and elucidation of what is true and deep" so as to improve one's vision of reality (MGM 321).<sup>133</sup>

With this in mind, I want to briefly consider the connection between this discussion of the imagination vs. fantasy and the Murdochian notion that selfishness is a threat to freedom, which I discussed in Section I. Interestingly, Murdoch argues that freedom may be "defined in terms of the triumph of the imagination over fantasy" (MGM 326). Properly unpacking this passage will involve a discussion of Murdoch's take on Plato's Myth of the Cave. At this point, I want to suggest a way in which we might interpret Murdoch's take on the Myth of the Cave, and then suggest why this explains her connection between the imagination and freedom. My main aim here is to suggest that freedom, for Murdoch, is making one's way out of the cave, as she understands it, which is to make the transition from fantasy to reality.

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<sup>132</sup> Hereafter, 'imagination' will mean 'truth-seeking creative imagination.'

<sup>133</sup> Also see "Against Dryness," pp. 19. By 'deep' Murdoch means "the sense in which any serious pursuit and expression of truth moves toward fundamental questions, as when a political problem refers us to a view of human nature." By 'truth' she means "something we recognize...when we are led to a juster, clearer, more detailed, more refined understanding" (MGM 321).

As I argued in the previous section, Murdoch's view of moral progress is informed by Plato's, and the use of the term 'moral pilgrimage' was occasioned by her interpretation of his philosophy. In Murdoch's view, one begins her pilgrimage from within the cave, where she is a prisoner. Being a prisoner, in Murdoch's view, just is to have a natural tendency towards selfishness, egotistic fabrication, uninformed opinion, and base-level illusions. This is the place at which one begins her pilgrimage, which I have already discussed at length.<sup>134</sup> People who remain there are not free. They have "no sense of reality...believe what is immediate and easy, judge from appearances, thoughtlessly accept convention and habit, have convenient ready-made values, and do whatever the priest says, and so on."<sup>135</sup> If a person wants to stay in the cave, as it were, what she truly seeks is self-consolation.

On the other hand, people who succeed in making the pilgrimage are enabled to acknowledge (and make a reality to themselves) the existence of other people and their experiences. They reach a level that is devoid of self and filled, instead, by contemplation of other people and then the Good itself. These are the people who are free because their "knowledge of the divine and practice of the selfless life has transcended the level of idols and images" (MGM 73).

Murdoch argues that "there is a continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness which is, for better or worse, a function of moral change" (MGM 329). Depending upon whether or not one has transitioned from fantasy to imagination in the truth-seeking creative sense, one will change morally, for the better or the worse. The person who makes it out of the cave which is, in Murdoch's view, the person who becomes a successful moral pilgrim, goes through a "slow

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<sup>134</sup> See my Part I of this Chapter, Section B, "Before the Pilgrimage."

<sup>135</sup> See "Ethics and the Imagination," *The Irish Theological Quarterly*, pg. 87

shift of attachments” from appearances to reality, whereby looking, concentrating, and attending gives rise to a transformation of one’s whole being.

By this I suggest that Murdoch means that a person must adjust her focus from egotistical, base-level attachments to something higher, and that this is only possible by really looking and concentrating on something outside oneself. This results in a change – a moral transition – which we might describe as an ascent out of the cave or a transition from fantasy and appearances to reality and truth. This ascent or transition changes a person because she no longer holds the same concerns, nor views the world in the same way. She no longer sees images but sees reality. Thus, this is why Murdoch talks of “Plato’s picture of the progressive destruction of images” (MGM 329), and why she says that freedom may be clarified by the contrast between fantasy and imagination.

The transition from fantasy to imagination can be directly mapped onto the Murdochian moral pilgrimage, and experiencing beauty is the key to this transition. The thought is that when one overcomes her ego and goes through the pilgrimage, she has transitioned away from images of fantasy, and is instead using her creative faculty in a manner that is truth-seeking. As we shall see, it is an experience of beauty that helps us make use of this kind of imagination.

### **C. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BEAUTY AND MORALITY**

Murdoch argues that beauty is:

the convenient and traditional name for something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness (SOG 84).

Beauty has an ability to prompt, almost automatically, the kind of activity which Murdoch argues is necessary to morality. As I have previously discussed, this activity is described by Murdoch as ‘attention,’ the “just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (SOG 34). Murdoch argues that this kind of ‘loving gaze’ involves a detached and non-possessive attention to the respective object, and it involves an effort to counteract states of delusion that result from perpetually focusing on oneself.

I want to return now to the passage at SOG, 84 where Murdoch describes a particular experience of the beauty in nature:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then I suddenly observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (SOG 84).

During this experience of the kestrel, the importance that one places on herself and her selfish attachments fades away. Her attention and focus is drawn away from her resentment and anxiety and instead toward something other than herself, namely, the beauty of the kestrel. As I have discussed at length in Section 1, Murdoch argues that if a person is to make moral progress, she must exercise “unselfing,” which results from exercising attention. Beauty, because it prompts the exercise of attention, is “the most obvious thing in our surroundings which is an occasion for unselfing” (SOG 84). What we need is a change of consciousness, and beauty is the way in which we can change how we see the world. Murdoch gives this example of experiencing the kestrel so that we may understand this concept of change the way she wants us to see it. As I read that example, Murdoch wants me to recall a time in which I was anxious, resentful, and oblivious of my surroundings – even “brooding on some damage done to my prestige,” and then



suddenly observed beauty. In that moment, she insists, everything is altered, and “when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important” (SOG 82).

I suggest that Murdoch’s view of what it means to experience beauty might be interpreted as follows: When we see art or nature and apprehend beauty, this carries us to withdraw the egotistical part of ourselves. Something slips away from us in the moment in which we are required to exercise attention. That something is, in fact, ourselves. Yet, it isn’t as if everything disappears in that moment – something is surely left. That something is everything else; all that is not ourselves. We have never before seen this reality, yet we “gaze” upon it “with the passion of a lover.” In that moment, when we no longer figure in our self-focus, all that is not ourselves is “filled to the brim with being.” This is Murdochian love, to look and look until the self exists no more. In a sense, it is death – the death of the self by which the real world “becomes quite automatically the object of perfect love.”<sup>136</sup>

It is in this way that an experience of beauty gives us an example of the way in which we ought to act toward other objects, i.e., other individuals; that is, we ought to pay them *attention*. Hence, the same loving attitude that we take with respect to beauty is the attitude in which we ought to relate to other people, and beauty becomes – in a sense – analogous with morality. The notion of attention is the key to understanding Murdoch’s view regarding the relationship between beauty (whether in nature or art) and morality. The following passage by Simone Weil sheds light on this point:

Beauty is the supreme mystery of this world. It is a claim which attracts attention and yet does nothing to sustain it. Beauty always promises, but never gives anything; it stimulates hunger but has no nourishment for the

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<sup>136</sup> I am referencing Murdoch’s novel, *The Unicorn*, here in this suggested interpretation of her view. See pp. 197-198.

part of the soul which looks in this world for sustenance. It feeds only the part of the soul that gazes. While exciting desire, it makes clear that there is nothing in it to be desired, because the one thing we want is that it should not change. If one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, the desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention.<sup>137</sup>

As Weil argues, beauty attracts our attention – our undivided focus – and it teaches us to learn to practice that very kind of attention. Drawing heavily on Weil’s view, Murdoch argues that acquiring this faculty of disinterested attention is part of what it is to become moral, which, as we have already seen, is to defeat one’s ego. Morality requires that a person focus her attention on other people rather than herself, and develop a just and loving attitude toward other people.

Indeed, the successful moral pilgrim is a person who has learned to exercise attention towards other people, but attention is less accessible in that context than it is in the context of beauty. Someone else’s reality is hidden from our view because of the unremitting activity of our egos. This activity must be stopped in order for the reality of another person to be seen. Therefore, the fundamental connection between moral activity and experiences of beauty, on Murdoch’s view, lies in the fact that these experiences can train us to exercise attention. That is, experiences of beauty train us to respond and attend to things in the morally ideal way. Since exercising attention – something that involves humility – is unnatural to us, and since we are creatures of illusions, which we create to feed our egos, we need a venue by which it can be made accessible to us. The contemplation of beauty fulfills this role. Indeed, the apprehension of beauty, Murdoch argues, makes the purification of one’s consciousness possible.

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<sup>137</sup> Weil, “Human Personality,” *Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Rees, p. 29

As I have discussed, Murdoch thinks we are creatures of fantasy, which feeds the ego. We naturally tend to create illusions about ourselves and others, and attention is something that is unnatural to us. Attention to reality implies the forgetfulness of self. It makes us wait and it humbles us. Beauty allows us to see that reality is something other than and outside of these fantasies. Art and nature cannot be used for us to satisfy our egos; they resist that. So apprehending their beauty draws out the connection between reality and the defeat of the ego.

Earlier I said that an experience of beauty helps us make use of our creative faculty (imagination) in a manner that is truth-seeking. Seeing reality requires creative imagination because one cannot see reality when she is absorbed in fantasies. In order to see reality, one must transition to truth-seeking imagination, which is involved in the exercise of attention. Beauty is important here because when we experience beauty we really look at it – we truly see it – because it requires of us that we become detached from our own self-interests and that we respect it. We do not see it from the perspective of something that we have created for our own consolation. Instead, we see it justly and lovingly and doing so involves our faculty of imagination (MGM 321).

The process of imagination is that which allows us to venture into the world outside ourselves. We are, in Murdoch's view, responsible for what exactly it is that we see, since we have the capacity to imagine and attend to the world. Being morally responsible is something that applies in the context of perception: we are responsible for engaging in a certain kind of imaginative seeing, and the work of our faculty of imagination is what produces moral vision. Thus, one might say that, for Murdoch, reality is actually made normative in a creative process of the imagination. The imagination is the faculty by which reality can be accessed, but the only way that imagination can be used to do so is when a person engages in a certain kind of moral

activity – just and loving attending. This process requires the exercise of attention and love, and it requires humility. When we experience beauty, we discover value in the world around us via its ability to compel us to forget ourselves. Beauty, in requiring us to consider and examine the reality of something other than ourselves, helps us to overcome our fantasies. It is through this kind of experience that we are oriented towards reality and prompted to perceive it justly and lovingly. Thus an experience of beauty, and the role that the imagination plays in such an experience, is the very kind of experience that allows us to join the world as it truly is.

However, Murdoch suggests that there are certain experiences that can promote absorption into one's self-centered fantasies. Indeed, she maintains that most of art is self-consoling fantasy. One might wonder, then, how Murdoch reconciles this with the discussion that I have outlined above. I suggest that this issue can be resolved through an analysis of Murdoch's theory of art, and her arguments regarding the difference between good and bad art.

#### **D. BEAUTY IN THE CONTEXT OF ART**

"Beauty," Murdoch writes, "is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct,"<sup>138</sup> but "when we move from beauty in nature to beauty in art we are already in a more difficult region" (SOG 83). In her view, there is a difference between bad art – which just is self-consoling fantasy – and good art, which has the capacity to affect people in a positive way. Good art is something that "affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent" (SOG 83). It is something that opposes selfish obsession and self-consoling fantasy, both when it is created and when it is experienced and enjoyed. Murdoch insists that art "invigorates our best

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<sup>138</sup> Murdoch notes that she draws this from Plato's *Phaedrus* (SOG 83).

faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul” (S&G 83). This is possible because art invites us to unpossessively contemplate it. When we do this, we resist being absorbed into our own selfish dreams (S&G 83).

Literature and painting, in particular, show us the “sense in which the concept of virtue is tied onto the human condition” (SOG 84). Murdoch argues that these arts show us the pointlessness of virtue, yet they also show us its supreme importance. Thus, experiencing art trains a person “in the love of virtue” (SOG 84). Murdoch writes:

The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself, and form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe. Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of this world, and reveals it with a sense of unity and form (SOG 84).

This form is something that resists what we are used to; that is, it resists the patterns of the fantasies in which we tend to be absorbed. This is part of what distinguishes good art from bad on Murdoch’s view: if art does not seem mysterious, and if its form seems recognizable and familiar, then it is probably the sort of art that is self-consoling. This is bad art. Good art, on the other hand, shows us the difficulty of being objective because it shows us the (quite different) way the world looks from the perspective of an objective vision. Good art is free of bias and prejudice and “totally opposed to selfish obsession.” It is free of self-interest or partiality, and it “invites unpossessive contemplation” (SOG 83). Good art teaches us that it is possible to view something without prejudice or any kind of personal agenda, and hence, we see how different that point of view – that objective vision – is from the way in which we usually see the world. Since this way of looking, as it were, is so foreign to us, it is difficult to learn, and we become aware of just how difficult it is via the experience of good art.

The good artist creates her work via love of the real. This means that she does not indulge fantasy; rather she presents us with a truthful image of our own human condition, and does so in a form that can be “steadily contemplated” (SOG 84). It is in this way that art turns us to reality; e.g., Rembrandt’s “Head of an Old Woman” is not flattering – it just depicts her as she is. The painter does not seek to change her features. Great art involves a beautiful presentation of a detailed, yet unexaggerated realism and truth. It leads us to a “juster, clearer, more detailed, and more refined understanding” and it “explains truth itself” insofar as a work of art can be seen as a symbol of truth elsewhere (MGM 321). Art presents reality in a beautiful way, and because beauty commands our full attention, the ego vanishes in its presence. It is in this way that art makes reality palpable to us.

Art, in Murdoch’s view, “can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer,” and it “exhibits to us the connection, in human beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion” (SOG 85). This is why Murdoch claims that art is the “most educational of all human activities.” In art, we can truly see the nature of morality. Good art is something that exists outside of us, and we surrender ourselves to its authority via an unpossessive and unselfish love.

Furthermore, art that is created via love of the real (good art) can be seen as analogous with morality. As I have explained, Murdoch maintains that the great artist can increase our awareness of reality. Art shows us the particular, and it sharpens our perceptions of it. A great work of art shows us the gap between “self” and world; it commands us to contemplate the other. It does not console us, or build up our pride, or feed the illusions that we create of ourselves. This is analogous to the way in which we ought to behave toward other individuals: we ought to contemplate them in their individual particularities, and we ought to look and look again, giving them our full attention. The goal is to see them as they really are – to gain a sharpened perception

of them. Just as Rembrandt does not give us a consoling image of the old woman, our true perception of individual realities will not console us; that is, if we are approaching other individuals in a moral way, we will come to see them much the same way that we see art: We will see them as they are rather than through the lens of our fantasies, whereby they become merely what we want them to be. However, in order to be a moral person, one must see others as distinct from oneself, and she must recognize the needs that other person has. This requires relinquishing the ego's selfish desire to de-realize that other person. For example, M, until she has given D true attention, sees D as she wants her to be – a juvenile person who has stolen her son. On a selfish level, M wants to see D this way because it benefits her: It consoles M, and it makes her feel better about herself to think that D is not worthy of her son.<sup>139</sup> When M finally sees D as she really is, this is not a self-consoling experience. It is a humbling experience. M realizes that she has been the problem all along, and that she has not seen D justly. The apprehension of reality, in this way, gives rise to humility.

When we contemplate art we are acting in the manner in which a moral person will act. In fact, having the clear and just vision that art gives us is the fundamental requirement of the Pilgrim. Murdoch writes, "To overcome egoism in its protean forms of fantasy and illusion is automatically to become more moral" (F&S 45). Reality is independent of our egotistic fantasies and illusions and to see reality is to see the truth it presents. The realism and attention in great art is found in the moral pilgrim and in the good person. Art connects good with reality: "Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel)...(F&S 80)." It makes us aware of reality, and via its ability to captivate us, it makes us act in the manner in which we ought to relate to other people. Enjoying true art is:

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<sup>139</sup> This might be similar to the way in which insecurity gives rise to bullying: The selfish part of a person wants to pick on someone else to either draw the focus away from one's own flaws or make one feel better about herself.

part of a life-long education in moral discernment... Good art, however complex, presents an evident combination of purity and realism: and if we think at one of moral teachings which do the same (the Gospels, St. Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Parts of Plato), it has to be admitted that these too are in their own perfectly natural way art. The development of any skill increases our sense of reality. Learning an art is... learning how to make a formal utterance of a perceived truth and render it splendidly worthy of a trained purified attention without falsifying the process (F&S 84).

In Murdoch's view, the notion of a loving respect for an individual reality other than oneself is something that is relevant to all forms of art. However, she insists that the highest form of art is tragedy, "because its subject-matter is the most important and most individual that we know" (S&G 54). Usually, the artist strives to make his creation self-contained and self-explanatory, but what makes the art of tragedy "disturbing" is that self-contained form is combined with something that defies form, namely, "the individual being and destiny of human persons" (S&G 55). In the next section, my aim is to examine why, exactly, Murdoch suggests that this is the case.

## **E. TRAGEDY**

I mentioned in Part I that Murdoch develops a conception of 'original sin.' I argued that by 'original sin' Murdoch means that we are born with selfish tendencies, and we need to be freed from our egos. This discussion reappears in her theory of tragedy. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, "Comic and Tragic," she notes that 'original sin' "may be seen as a reasonable generalization about the natural sinfulness of humans," or it may be "used as a fantasizing protection of the ego, a deterministic myth, concealing chance and obliterating freedom, and making everything we do seem innocent because inevitable" (MGM 103). The latter point draws attention to our tendency to use the fact that we are 'human,' and that 'humans are naturally



sinful' as an excuse for being immoral. This line of thinking, Murdoch suggests, is commonly used to make immorality less of an evil because it is impossible to avoid.

This is important to Murdoch's discussion of tragedy because she wants to show that both this idea of original sin and tragedy concern the difference between suffering and death. Sin, she says, is "the evasion of the idea of death" (MGM 104). If, on the other hand, we acknowledge death, this will lead us to morality. That is, acknowledging the fact that part of our human condition is that we will die, leads to a humbling of the self, and in turn a death of the ego.

Murdoch's discussion of death is highly influenced by Simone Weil's arguments on the subject. Indeed, Murdoch's notion of 'unselfing,' is connected with Weil's view. For Weil, the idea of death and what she calls the 'de-creation of the ego' go hand-in-hand. In his introduction to her letters and essays in *Waiting for God*, Leslie Fiedler writes: "In 1943 [Weil] succeeded at last in dying, completing the process of "de-creation" at which she had aimed her whole life."<sup>140</sup> Weil argues that when we renounce ourselves to:

death itself, even to the point of provisionally renouncing the hope of immortality, we are ready for the final gesture of obedience: the surrender of the last vestiges of selfhood. In the ultimate 'nuptial yes,' we must de-create our egos, offer up everything we have ever meant by 'I' so that Divine Love may pass unimpeded through the space we once occupied, close again on Itself. 'We are created for this consent, and this consent alone.'<sup>141</sup>

I am arguing that Murdoch means to suggest that that the idea of death and the realization of it leads to something like the de-creation of our egos; that is, this realization plays a role in defeating the selfish part of us. While I understand that Murdoch does not want to bring a notion of God into her philosophy, and while she parts from Weil on that point, we have reason to

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<sup>140</sup> Leslie Fiedler, "Introduction" to Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, pg. xxvi

<sup>141</sup> Fiedler, pg. xxxiv

believe that Weil's conception of the death of the self – the ego – informs Murdoch's discussion of death. For Murdoch, it is not a "gesture of obedience" to God, or a "nuptial yes," but it is a surrender of selfhood. Indeed, Murdoch tells us that our evil part must be "condemned 'not to suffering but to death'" (MGM 107). Thus, if sin is the evasion of the idea of death, and if my arguments here are correct, it would make sense to say that, for Murdoch, sin also evades the defeat of the ego, and, hence, part of sinning just is acting in accordance with egotistic fantasies.

The connection with this and the way in which Murdoch is using the concept of original sin involves the notion of Lucifer, which she brings up both in the *Sovereignty of Good* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: According to Christian tradition, the "fall" of Lucifer was the result of a prideful defiance of God, and a self-focused desire for power. His fate was eternal suffering, not death. Murdoch argues in the *Sovereignty of Good* that this picture of the eternally suffering Lucifer was, hence, used "to transform the idea of death into the idea of suffering," (SOG 6) and this gave rise to a shift in our attention which, in turn, led to a

taming and beautifying of the idea of death, a cult of pseudo-death and pseudo-transience. Death becomes *Liebestod*, painful and exhilarating, or at worst charming and sweetly tearful...[this is true of] the general beaten track which leads from Kant to popular philosophies of the present day. When the neo-Kantian Lucifer<sup>142</sup> gets a glimpse of real death and real chance he takes refuge in sublime emotions and veils with an image of tortured freedom that which has been rightly said to be the proper study of philosophers (SOG 81).

I note this passage and the one that follows, because I am trying to draw attention to the fact that this neo-Kantian Lucifer illustrates the problem that Murdoch thinks the art of tragedy can address. Murdoch argues that Kant "abolished God and made man God in his stead." He made the will the creator of value, and

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<sup>142</sup> I take it that this Lucifer symbolizes an eternally fallen – but not dead – pride in the human power of reason.

values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it. The sovereign moral concept is freedom, or possible courage in a sense which identifies it with freedom, will, power (SOG 79).

Murdoch insists that when Kant wanted to find something “clean and pure outside the selfish empirical psyche, he followed a sound instinct, but...he looked in the wrong place” (SOG 81). His inquiry, in her view, led him back to the self, and this is where his followers remain. Murdoch’s main worry here is that Kant’s reverence for the human faculty of reason gives rise to a dangerous kind of pride. When a person realizes that nothing in nature can defeat her power of reason she, herself, has – in virtue of the self-recognition that is involved – taken at least a temporary kind of self-focus. This self-focus, in any context in which it may arise, however, is exactly what Murdoch wants us to slay.

The idea of Lucifer entails someone/something that would eternally suffer in the name of pride and power, but would not die. Due to what Lucifer represents, if he glimpses the idea of death, he (or people who subscribe to the line of thought that has come out of the notion of Lucifer) will evade it. He will simply take refuge in Kant’s line of thought, and focus on the idea that his faculty of reason cannot be defeated. Hence, he will develop a kind of pride in his own power.

The eternal suffering of the ‘neo-Kantian Lucifer’ becomes a kind of sublimity, where the pain involved just brings him to recognize a certain power. The notion of Lucifer (which just is the notion of selfishness, pride, evil, power), then, comes with a kind of thrill. Furthermore,

Murdoch wants to show that this attention to suffering instead of death, as a result, veils “the proper study of philosophers.”<sup>143</sup>

I mentioned a moment ago that Murdoch’s discussion of tragedy is concerned with the difference between suffering and death. We are ready to turn to that discussion now. With an eye to the philosophy of Simone Weil, Murdoch writes:

Weil says that exposure to God condemns what is evil in us ‘pas a la souffrance mais a la mort.’ Not to suffering but to death. Plays in which people suffer but do not die are not (strictly speaking) tragedies. Our concept of tragedy must contain some dreadful vision of the reality and significance of death. Here sin, evil, is the evasion of the idea of death; refuge is taken in exercise of power, heroic fantasies of will or fate, cults of suffering or the passing-on of pain as damage to others. The tragic art form is rare because it is difficult to keep attention focused on the truth without the author slipping into an easier...mode. In the truthful vision evil is justly judged and misery candidly surveyed. The language which can achieve this is a high poetic language. Tragedy is paradoxical art because to succeed it must really upset us while exhibiting, but not as mere consolation, some orderly and comprehensive vista of evil and catastrophe (MGM 104).

Tragedy, Murdoch insists, is “the form of art where the exercise of love is most like its exercise in morals...art after all is consolation and delight, although really great art gives us a mixed and somber delight which is akin to our recognition of morality” (S&G 55). This is because in the real world there is incompleteness and action is not always accompanied by “radiant understanding” or by “strong and consoling emotions” (S&G 55).

This brings us to an important distinction that Murdoch makes between ethics and aesthetics. She argues that aesthetic experiences differ from moral experiences especially

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<sup>143</sup> Murdoch refers to Socrates’ claim in the *Phaedo* (64a) that philosophy is the art of dying. She writes, “Philosophy is a training for death, when the soul will exist without the body. It attempts by argument and the meticulous pursuit for truth to detach the soul from material and egotistic goals and to enliven its spiritual faculty which is intelligent and akin to the good” (F&S 21).

because they are enjoyable: The just and loving gaze (attention) directed at a beautiful object is met by a pleasurable awareness of beauty. This does not occur in the context of morality. Indeed, pleasure or enjoyment is not present in moral cases. Part of morality just is to admit the existence of suffering and the contingency of life, in Murdoch's view. The truth about the human condition is not enjoyable, and virtue is not met with happiness; being moral does not guarantee happiness or enjoyment; in fact, it helps us to recognize that life just is not what we fantasize about it being. Since tragedy in art is the attempt to overcome the defeat which we undoubtedly suffer in our world, since it is "the human spirit mourning and yet exulting in its strength," it is the most akin to morality. Murdoch writes:

It is the role of tragedy, and also of comedy, and of painting to show us suffering without a thrill and death without a consolation. Or if there is any consolation it is the austere consolation of a beauty which teaches that nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous...art invigorates us by a juxtaposition, almost an identification of pointlessness and value. The death of Patroclus, the death of Cordelia, the death of Petya Rostov. All is vanity. The only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue (SOG 85).

Morality, on Murdoch's view, holds no promise of happiness, and it is about facing up to the frailty and transience of the human condition. While the Good compels us to do good, as it were, we will not ever attain complete perfection. Life involves conflict and misery. However, Murdoch agrees with Weil that "beauty is the only source of joy open to us."<sup>144</sup> We can see human misery as beautiful "when we enjoy great tragedy." Murdoch argues that the art of tragedy is "the image of a (rarely achieved) moral condition" (MGM 106), and this is why she is most concerned with it: She claims that, via the emotional experience of tragedy, we can come to have the important realization that there are things other than us that exist and deserve our

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<sup>144</sup> Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, vol. 2, p. 613

attention, that there is no promise of happiness, that the human condition is frail and transient, and that we will not ever be perfect. She argues that Schopenhauer gets “near the center of the matter” when he says that “[Tragedy] shows us the greatest misfortune, not as an exception, not as something occasioned by rare circumstances or monstrous characters, but as arising easily and of itself out of the actions and characters of men, indeed almost as essential to them, and thus bring it terribly near to us.’ (WWI, Book III, ‘The Platonic Idea: The Object of Art’)” (MGM 101).

Tragedy resists comfort, it is “even thoroughly uncomfortable,” and it is a “broken whole.” This “checks” the process of the egoistic mind. Death must be represented in art because it “threatens the ego’s dream of eternal life and happiness and power,” and tragedy must – like religion – “break the ego, destroying the illusory whole of the unified self.” Indeed:

Tragedy must break the charmed completion which is the essence of lesser art, revealing the true nature of sin, the futility of fantasy and the reality of death. Since it is art it must have borders, it must be some kind of magic, but must also inhibit magic in its more familiar and consoling uses (MGM 105).

Tragedy shows us the way things really are: It can lead us to see things as they are, and to see others, rather than to consolation (to self, to pride in a part of ourselves, to illusion). Tragedy is the solution to the death/suffering problem because it defeats the ego and it threatens its dream of happiness and power. It does not console us, and it shows us the truth about death. When we realize that reality for us as human beings is uncomfortable and that it is full of conflict and misery, and we realize that the human condition is frail and transient, our egos begin to relent. We begin to notice others when our egos are defeated. It is then that we are able to see that those particular individuals should be given our loving attention. It is not that experiencing the art of tragedy demonstrates this relationship with other people; rather it is that experiencing the art of

tragedy threatens and defeats the ego, which in turn allows us to notice something we have not focused on before: the reality of other individuals in all of their particularity.

To briefly review, in this section, I have shown that Murdoch distinguishes good art from bad art insofar as bad art promotes egotistic fantasy, while good art gives us a loving respect for an individual reality other than ourselves. Furthermore, I have shown that, for Murdoch, though morality and aesthetic experience require the same attitude, these kinds of experiences themselves are quite different. The same virtue (love) is required of us in both the aesthetic and the moral contexts, and in both contexts, fantasy is that which can prevent us from seeing properly. Moreover, I have argued that, for Murdoch, experiences of beauty in nature and experiences of good art make possible the transition from fantasy to imagination, and, hence, these experiences facilitate moral progress.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PLATO, KANT AND MURDOCH**

#### **Part I: Murdoch and Plato**

##### **A. INTRODUCTION**

My general aim in this section is to analyze Murdoch's view regarding the connection between aesthetic experience and morality, and to compare and contrast Murdoch's view with Plato's view. In chapter 1, I argue that beauty plays two roles in Plato's general theory of moral

progress: (1) Some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; that is, these experiences can be used to promote the kind of training that Plato suggests should take place during the beginning stages of education in the *Republic*. This is an affective kind of training, whereby a person learns to feel appropriately toward appropriate things. Experiences of beauty via art have the capacity to influence a person's character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. (2) An erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from (1) in that it adds a higher kind of cognitive component which is lacking in (1). In (1), cognition is involved (cognition is involved in all affection), but only as perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, erotic experiences of beautiful people promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

With this in mind, I shall divide this first part of Chapter 4 into two sections. In the first section, I shall compare and contrast Murdoch's and Plato's views regarding the connection between art and moral training. Then, in the second section, I shall compare and contrast Plato's and Murdoch's views of sexual love and its place in aesthetics.



## B. ART AND MORAL TRAINING: POINTS OF CONTACT IN PLATO AND MURDOCH

Let us begin with a quotation from Murdoch's novel, *The Bell*:

Dora [was] in the National Gallery...[she] stopped at last in front of Gainsborough's picture of his two daughters...Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marveled, with a kind of gratitude...and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvelous generosity, the splendor. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect...Here was something which her consciousness would not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless...the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest and value. But now there was something else in it after all.<sup>145</sup>

As I discussed in Section II, Murdoch insists that experiences of great art, such as the one that she describes in this example, are revelations in the sense that, during the time in which we take them in, they bring us to forget ourselves. She argues that a great work of art shows us how to contemplate something outside of ourselves – something distinct and separate – and it shows us the divide between self-centeredness and the world. As I showed in Section I, Murdoch takes it that this kind of vision is a fundamental requirement for moral progress. In Murdoch's view, art can elicit this vision, and this is how it gives rise to moral training.

The notion of attention, which I have already discussed at length, is the key to understanding Murdoch's view regarding the relationship between beauty (whether in nature or art) and morality. Murdoch argues that acquiring this faculty of disinterested attention is part of what it is to become moral, which, as we have already seen, is to defeat one's ego, focus one's attention on other people rather than oneself, and to develop a just and loving attitude toward

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<sup>145</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*, (Penguin Group: NY), 1986, p. 191-192

other people. She insists that when children are invited to look at art or listen to music or stories, or to contemplate beauty in nature, we teach them to understand how they are to act when they experience these things; we teach them the “spirit” in which they should take them in. To properly attend to something is to give it our full focus, and to refrain from directing any of that focus toward ourselves. In this sense, when someone is trained to exercise attention, she is trained to respect something other than herself. Since beauty is something that can capture our full and undivided focus, it, in particular, is a vehicle for teaching a person the practice of attention. This is the motivation behind Murdoch’s view that experiences of beauty via art, through the attitude that they command us to acquire, teach us the morally ideal way of relating to the world.

Therefore, the foundational connection between moral activity and experiences of beauty, on Murdoch’s view, lies in the fact that these experiences can train us to exercise attention. That is, experiences of beauty train us to respond and attend to things in the morally ideal way. Since exercising attention – something that involves humility – is unnatural to us, we need a venue by which this practice can be made accessible to us. The contemplation of beauty fulfills this role.

Indeed, the apprehension of beauty, Murdoch argues, makes the purification of one’s consciousness possible: As is evidenced by the example of Dora above, and perhaps by other examples of experiences that we, ourselves, might remember having, during an experience of beauty one is not self-focused; rather beauty demands that we pay it due attention and this requires turning our focus toward only it. These experiences allow us to discover our ability to forget ourselves and perceive justly. This makes it possible for us to realize that we can “pierce the veil of selfish consciousness.” We learn to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness, whereby virtue is the attempt to defeat the ego. Beauty shows us something other

than our own consciousness, for during the time when we experience it, we are drawn outside of that consciousness. In light of this we learn that there is something beyond our selfish concerns and we learn that it is at least possible to get beyond them, at least during the moment in which we experience beauty. As a result we begin to see that the ego can be overcome. Hence, through experiences of beauty, we learn to pay attention and respond to moral situations by keeping our attention focused on the real situation rather than allowing our attention to return repeatedly to ourselves. In this sense, experiencing beauty illuminates the fact that reality is connected with the defeat of the ego.

The moral training that occurs through an experience of beauty begins our transition from illusion – the egotistic fog which is the starting point of one's moral pilgrimage – to the defeat of the ego and the realization of reality, which as I have argued, is the aim of the pilgrimage. When we learn to keep our attention properly focused, we are able to know, understand, and respect reality as it truly is rather than from an illusory perspective. Thus, an experience of beauty facilitates the Murdochian moral pilgrimage.

With this in mind, one may recognize important connections between Murdoch's theory and Plato's. For example, Murdoch, like Plato, argues that experiences of beauty via art have a positive transforming effect; they train us to be moral. However, unlike Murdoch, Plato does not directly argue that art teaches us to respect things distinct from us, or that it teaches us to attend to the needs of other people; rather, he emphasizes the way in which art puts one's soul in order. Interestingly, though, for Plato, ordering one's soul does entail disciplining the lower parts, and

one might argue that these lower parts of the soul are the parts that ground what Murdoch would refer to as our selfish desires.<sup>146</sup>

However, it is important to notice that, in the *Republic*, when he discusses the relationship between art and moral training, Plato does not specifically mention anything about the experience of beauty via art being able to turn our focus away from selfish desires and toward the Good. Instead, as I have previously shown, it is in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* where Plato suggests that in experiences of beauty (specifically, erotic experiences of beautiful people) at least involve a directing away from one's material concerns. On his view, through this kind of experience of beauty, one may find one's true self. For Plato, one is able to become a better version of herself (she is able to grow morally) by climbing the ladder of the *Symposium*, or by having an experience such as that which is described in the *Phaedrus*. In both of these cases, one becomes morally good by becoming a certain kind of agent. She likens herself to a god through a relationship with an educator, and is hence, more like the Forms themselves. In this way, she is morally transformed, but the sort of experience that gives rise to this sort of moral transformation, on Plato's view, is not an experience of beauty via art. As Murdoch, herself, puts it, "Plato allowed the beauty of the lovely boy an awakening power which he denied to the beauty of...art" (SOG 86).

Murdoch agrees with Plato that some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; they have the capacity to influence a person's character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. However, unlike Plato, she suggests that these experiences of beauty

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<sup>146</sup> Scott Dunbar argues that "the lowest part of the soul – the appetitive part – is inhabited by the ego." See "On Art, Morals, and Religion: Some Reflections on the Work of Iris Murdoch," *Religious Studies*, p. 515-524.

via art also promote increased moral understanding, unselfing, and involve a more highly cognitive element.<sup>147</sup>

Plato and Murdoch generally share the view that art has a morally positive affect on those who experience it, and that art should not be divorced from morality. I recognize that Plato is best known for his apparent rejection of art in *Republic*, Book X, and that this point is often raised as an objection to the view that I am discussing here. However, in chapter 1, I considered Plato's treatment of this point, and I argued that Plato's view is not at all compromised by the abovementioned objection. In the interest of drawing a point of connection between Plato and Murdoch's views of art and moral training, I am going to consider Murdoch's response to the objection, and the way in which her response is influenced by Plato. I want to return briefly to the *Republic*.

Plato's discussion of poetry in these two books shows that art can have a positive transforming effect, but it should be censored in cases when it misrepresents what is ethically appropriate. Plato notes that art does in fact have the power – in the case of buffoonery, sex, anger, and desires, pleasures, and pains – to “nurture and water” the lower parts of the soul and establish “them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled” (606d).

I argued that this is because, on Plato's view, the appetite and spirited parts of the soul are cognitively limited to perception (and they accept evaluative appearances), and since the pleasure involved in poetry appeals to the lower parts of the soul (606d, 607), these parts of the soul will likely accept the appearances/images that are presented in art. These appearances will

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<sup>147</sup> I mean that, for Murdoch, experiences of beauty via art do both (1) and (2) that I distinguished in the beginning of this section, but for Plato, they only do (1).

be false at worst and reflective of – but removed from – the truth, at best. Therefore, these lower parts of the soul will accept (and pursue) the worthless or the bad if it is presented via art as good. However, my arguments showed that, by being exposed to art that captures the nature of something true – while they cannot perceive it – the lower parts of the soul can be trained to track the higher value that such art presents. Thus, though Plato concedes that certain art can indeed foster immoral character, this is not at all inconsistent with his claim that good art – that which represents what is ethically appropriate – gives rise to moral reformation.

As she makes particularly evident in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch agrees with Plato that there is bad art, and that art can corrupt a person. Indeed, she agrees that art can be dangerous. Murdoch argues that the reason certain art can corrupt a person is that “by an attractive eloquent commentary upon human affairs it apes a sort of insight, a unified vision, which in its true form is a spiritual achievement” (MGM 19). In other words, this kind of art represents something which we subconsciously desire to be the case – we see in art an illusory unity and perfection. Murdoch wants to show that the problem with this kind of art is that it prompts false egotistic fantasies.<sup>148</sup> The artist “softens egotistic fantasy by disguising it and bribes us by the purely formal pleasure which he offers us in his fantasies” (MGM 105).

Murdoch explains: “Art is the fantasy life of the artist stimulating the fantasy life of the client, with the factitious work of art laying overlooked between them as a sort of disguised bribe.” Whereas in normal circumstances we would be repulsed by the private fantasies of

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<sup>148</sup> Dunbar remarks, “The ego [which he thinks inhabits Plato’s appetitive part of the soul] thrives on fantasy, and one of its chief activities is the creation of illusions.” (See “On Art, Morals and Religion,” p. 18) He argues that the conflict within the soul results from the fact that the ego’s possessiveness and narcissism directly contradicts reason’s awareness of the world as independent of oneself and that other persons are distinct and separate from oneself. I suggest that it should be made clear that if we map Murdoch’s moral psychology directly onto Plato’s, this might be the result. However, Plato, himself, never directly makes this argument regarding the tripartite soul.

someone else, the artist “persuades us to accept his by disguising them cleverly, and by offering us formal and aesthetic pleasures which then incite us to release, upon our side, a play of personal fantasy which is normally inhibited” (MGM 20). Freud, whom Murdoch cites as a disciple of Plato, calls the pleasure that comes from art work a ‘fore-pleasure,’ and he argues that all art aspires to the condition of pornography, which is the end point to which an art object is a mechanical stimulus.

Yet, important to Murdoch’s view is that this kind of “dangerous” art has its place in a good philosophy of art and its relationship with moral philosophy. Murdoch makes the point that Plato’s “attack on art” is intended to enlighten us. “It must be seen in the context of his whole moral philosophy. Life is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of truth, involving ipso facto a purification of energy and desire in the light of a vision of what is good” (MGM 14). What she means is that if we see the possibility that art may present us with an illusion, and that the lower parts of the soul will be tempted to accept that illusion, and hence, the world of appearances, we will be enlightened; that is, we will come to realize that there is a difference between appearance and reality, even on a level outside of art, and we will recognize that the transition between the two realms is one that we must make. For Plato, this transition (which Murdoch interprets as a pilgrimage) involves properly ordering one’s soul. For Murdoch, it involves overcoming the ego.

Thus, for both Murdoch and Plato, an experience of art presents an alleged good – something that appears to be good, but may be merely an appearance or illusion. While art can, in some cases, be damaging because it can falsely appear to present or represent goodness, it can also – when it captures the nature of something true and real – be the source of and the impetus to moral transformation.

To briefly review, in this sub-section, I have given an account of Murdoch's moral theory and her view regarding the connection between art and moral training. Furthermore, I have considered the way in which her view compares and contrasts with Plato's view of aesthetic education, as he presents it in the *Republic*. My arguments have shown that the question as to whether art may also have a morally negative affect on those who experience it does not constitute a strong objection against either Murdoch's or Plato's thesis regarding the relationship between art and moral training.

### **C. SEXUAL LOVE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH MORALITY**

I have shown that love is an important aspect of Murdoch's view regarding the way in which beauty and morality are connected. However, I have not discussed Murdoch's view regarding erotic experiences of beauty and sexual love. It is an interesting question as to whether Murdoch agrees with Plato's view regarding erotic experiences of beautiful people. In other words, for Murdoch, is sexual love an insight into goodness and beauty or is it, perhaps, a source of egotistic fog and illusion?

In the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Plato speaks of beauty in terms of sexual love, and an ascent from physical passion to Beauty itself. As I have shown, on Plato's view, sexual love is an important impetus for the soul in its search for the vision of the Good. Due to the unique role of beauty and sight, the physical presence of the beloved – as it affects the lover – is, for Plato, capable of prompting the soul to search for the Good. As Murdoch puts it, *Phaedrus* 250e “expresses Plato's sense of certainty about the reality of goodness, which we are properly designed to love” (MGM 15). Here Plato suggests that we are able to see and love beauty more



easily than good, even though we all have a built-in desire for the Good. In his view, one of the ways in which beauty is perceived is through an erotic experience.

Plato wants to show that a certain kind of moral reformation, which involves the discovery of the nature of the beloved person, and the loving actions inspired by this discovery (*Phaedrus* 253b, 255b), takes place specifically as a result of the reaction of the soul to an erotic experience of a beautiful person. Sexuality is very much a part of the experience, for the immediate reaction that the soul has is caused by the black horse, the appetite. One might say that we need the body's response (that immediate reaction of the appetitive part) to beauty to stimulate our vision and send it searching for goodness.

While Plato argues that erotic love involves an insight to beauty and goodness, he does not deny the possibility of blind sexual love. Furthermore, he does not deny the possibility of love inciting egotism or jealousy; after all, the young person is specifically warned against this possibility (*Phaedrus* 253b, 255b). However, as I have shown in Chapter 1, this kind of love results in one's inability to either ascend the ladder of love in the *Symposium* or master the horses that pull the chariot of the *Phaedrus*.

The opposing viewpoint – the thought that sexual love incites egotism and illusion – is important for my purposes here because, central to Murdoch's moral philosophy, is the notion that the ego draws us to natural self-centeredness and makes it difficult for us to escape its illusion. Murdoch's example of the mother and daughter-in-law in *The Sovereignty of Good* shows that envy, anxiety, and jealousy cause the mother-in-law to incorrectly perceive her daughter-in-law. When M finally makes an effort to see D clearly, this could be compared to a sort of Christian transformation of the self – a transition from one's fallen state to her potential

self. Christianity is something that Murdoch refers to over and over again in her work, and in fact, it has been suggested that sexual desire, and the physical aspect of love, are, in Murdoch's works, considered sins in the Christian sense (one might think particularly of the Dantean approach to Christianity<sup>149</sup>); that is, they are considered sins insofar as they are sources of egoistic self-delusion that come between us and the reality of our beloved.

What is particularly important for my purposes in this section is the fact that certain approaches to Christianity (such as the Dantean approach) suppose that a sexual response to the beauty of another is something that decreases motivation to pursue the vision of the good by binding the mind to a false object of love. On this view, sexual love, like other sins, creates a kind of egotistic 'fog' around the lover, impeding his vision of the reality of the other, and of the good.

It is interesting that certain views of Christianity advocate seeing goodness and an opportunity to exercise moral decision making in those we pity or in our enemies, but sometimes neglect to emphasize that we might see Christ in those with whom we are in (erotic) love.<sup>150</sup> Instead of emphasizing the role of sexual love in connecting one to the good, the sinful aspects of carnal love are emphasized in certain Christian views in the name of clarifying a difference between "good" and "bad" love.

From this sort of perspective, if sexual desire cannot be avoided as one stage in human life, love must be purified of bodily desire before a true vision of the other person or of the good can be achieved; that is, before the best form of human love and beneficence can be achieved. In

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<sup>149</sup> My discussion here is, in part, informed by Martha Nussbaum's "'Faint with Secret Knowledge': Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*," *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, pp.143 She suggests that Murdoch's view of sexual love is the Dantean view.

<sup>150</sup> See Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge': Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*," for more on this point.

this view, sexual love sees its object as passive, surrendering, and as a venue for superficial pleasure.

Given that both Plato's view and Christianity influenced (or at least played a role in the development of) Murdoch's work, and given that Murdoch is specifically committed to the fact that egotism has a negative effect on people, it is a good question as to where she, herself, stands regarding the relationship sexual love and morality. The following passage sheds light on her view:

Love [is] the fruit and overflow of spirit. Plato's visions may seem far away from the mess of ordinary longing, but they shed light, we can understand. Falling in love is for many people their most intense experience, bringing with it a quasi-religious certainty, and most disturbing because it shifts the centre of the world from ourself to another place. A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it be no longer separate; or it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself (MGM 16-17).

In this passage, Murdoch acknowledges sexual love's potential for violence and selfishness, but she also calls it the greatest source of an unselfing experience that many people will ever have. Love can either facilitate selfishness and possessiveness, or it can "prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself" (MGM 17). Murdoch argues that the notion that falling in love is one of our most intense experiences. It brings an almost religious certainty and an overflow of spirit, yet it is "most disturbing because it shifts the center of the world from ourself to another place;" that is, it gives us a vision of reality.

Murdoch's moral pilgrimage necessarily involves a desire for perfection, clarity, understanding, and truth. In order to begin that pilgrimage, a person needs a starting point and an

inspiration – a vision. She must get some spiritual cue and learn to discipline her emotions. An erotic experience of beauty is a way to virtue, and it has an obvious starting point. However that starting point involves desire, anxiety, and excitement, and so it involves danger and temptation. Thus, there are people who will not be moved from the starting point of an erotic experience of beauty to a moral vision. What Murdoch has in mind here is Plato's "fallen prisoner of love" (*Phaedrus*, 252c). There are some people who will succumb to selfish temptations when they have an erotic experience of beauty, but there will also be those who overcome such temptations. Thus, Murdoch, like Plato, does not deny that sexual love might facilitate something negative. However, she insists that it also has the potential to prompt unselfing, which is necessary to the successful Murdochian moral pilgrim. Therefore, we can see that Murdoch's view of sexual love is far more akin to Plato's than it is to a view such as Dante's: Murdoch does not hold that all sexual love incites an egotistic fog or illusion, but rather that some people who experience sexual love may be affected negatively, in this way.

For Murdoch, an erotic experience of a beautiful person, which involves sexual love, can either send a person down a path of egotism, or it can bring her to virtue by way of the vision that beauty may give. In the latter case, the initial "desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention."<sup>151</sup> She writes:

To overcome egoism in its protean forms of fantasy and illusion is automatically to become more moral; to see the real is to see its independence and ergo its claims. The proper apprehension of beauty is joy in reality through the transfiguring of desire. Thus as we respond we experience the transcendence of the real and the personal ego fades as, in the words of the *Symposium* (210d), we 'escape from the mean petty slavery of the particular case and turn toward the open sea of beauty' (F&S 45).

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<sup>151</sup> I am restating a passage from the Weil quotation above.

Murdoch is sympathetic to the Platonic notion that moral life involves a slow shift of attachments (one may recall her arguments regarding the moral pilgrimage). This shift involves looking, attending to something, and concentrating, which becomes a source of “purified energy.” For Murdoch, this is a redemption of desire and sexual attachment, and it is one way in which the ego may be defeated. In her view, erotic experiences of beautiful people are a kind of education because they draw our interest away from ourselves and toward someone else.

For Murdoch, during an erotic experience of beauty, just as during an experience of beautiful art, one is not self-focused; rather beauty demands that we pay it due attention and this requires turning our focus toward only it. Beauty, whether it is experienced erotically or artistically, shows us that there is something beyond our selfish concerns and we learn that it is at least possible to get beyond them, at least during the moment in which we experience beauty. As a result we begin to see that the ego can be overcome.

Thus, for Murdoch, while sexual love has the potential to incite vice, it also has the potential to provide a vision of beauty and goodness. Erotic experiences of beauty – which involve sexual love – may give rise to moral training and also unselfing. Beauty, whether it is found in art or nature, teaches a person to practice attention, and this is the sense in which it trains a person to be moral. Seemingly, erotic experiences of beautiful people might entail an even more powerful sort of moral training than an experience of beauty via art, from the Murdochian point of view, since in the case of an erotic experience of beauty, the beauty toward which one is focusing her full attention is actually present in another human being. Since attending to other human beings justly and lovingly is the point of moral progress on Murdoch’s view, erotic experiences of beautiful people might be the closest experience one can have to practicing the sort of attention that she advocates.

## **Part II: Murdoch and Kant**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In addition to its Platonic influence, Murdoch's general view of aesthetics is strongly influenced by Kant's. Her evaluation of Kant's view of aesthetics can be discussed in light of the particular article, "The Sublime and the Good," which Murdoch wrote in 1959.<sup>152</sup> In this essay, Murdoch argues that Kant's theory of art must be rejected because it encompasses only "a very small area of what we normally think of as art" (S&G, 46), and it "fails to account for the greatness of tragedy" (S&G, 48). Her argument in support of this claim can be used as a foundation for an analysis of the differences and similarities between Murdochian and Kantian aesthetics. Thus, my aim in this section is to examine Murdoch's main argument in "The Sublime and the Good," and to thereby draw out some important points of connection, as well as points of distinction, between her view and Kant's.

### **B. ACCOUNTING FOR TRAGEDY IN AESTHETICS**

Let us begin by examining the following remark from "The Sublime and The Good":

Kant prefers bird-song to opera. Kant thinks that art is essentially play. Now Shakespeare is great art, and Shakespeare is not play, so Kant must be wrong (S&G, 49).

Murdoch argues that Kant "must be wrong" because a proper account of aesthetics should involve more than play – it must allow for crisis and conflict, which are both very well

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<sup>152</sup> In fact, Murdoch's aim in this essay is to "work towards [her] own sketch of a definition [of art] through a consideration and criticism of Kant's" (pp. 43).

represented by tragic art. In her view, it is not surprising that Kant is unable to give us an account of tragedy in his aesthetics (S&G, 51) because he wants us to

live by exceedingly simple and general rules: suppression of history, suspicion of eccentricity. Here we can see more clearly how it is that beauty symbolizes the good in its sensuous counterpart. The aesthetic judgment has the same simple self-contained character as the moral judgment, and it is ideally the response to something which is not complicated or highly individual. Kant's aesthetic tastes mirror his moral preferences. He would like, as it were, by morality to crystallise out of the historical process a simple society living strictly by extremely general rules, with no place for the morally complicated or eccentric (S&G, 51).

Instead, "the true view of the matter," according to Murdoch, is that:

Art and morals are...one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realization of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man (S&G, 52).

It is for this reason, Murdoch insists, that tragedy is the "highest art." Tragedy is the art that is most concerned with individuality. It harbors "the true sense of that exhilaration of freedom which attends art and which has its more rarely achieved counterpart in morals" (S&G, 52). As I have already discussed at length in Chapter 3, Murdoch wants to show that this is because tragedy allows us to apprehend other individuals and their particularities, and it reveals the true nature of sin (MGM 104-105). However, we may fail to see this because we are

sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions...we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own (S&G, 52).

Murdoch argues that fantasy is the enemy of true imagination. The enemies of art and morals, and hence, love, Murdoch insists, are selfishness and egotism. This is why, on her view, one must embark on the moral pilgrimage that she describes. One must overcome oneself, fantasy, and convention, and one way that this can be made possible is by experiencing tragic art such as *King Lear*, which is

exhilarating. It is also...painful. It is very like *Achtung*. Kant was marvelously near the mark. But he thought of freedom as the aspiration to a universal order consisting of a pre-fabricated harmony. It was not a tragic freedom. The tragic freedom implied by love is this: that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others...Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness (S&G, 52).

Murdoch wants aesthetic experience to be connected with this kind of freedom – the recognition of our indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of other individuals. I argued in Chapter 3 that the art of tragedy is connected with humility because it involves a presentation of the idea of death. The idea of death and the realization of it, leads to a humbling experience, namely, the realization of death plays a role in defeating the selfish part of us. Tragedy shows us the truth about human life (and death) without consolation, and the realization of this truth brings with it something “very like *Achtung*.” This wakes us from the egotistic dream for eternal power and happiness, and we begin to see what is beyond (or at least other than) such concerns. We are then able to notice something that we have not noticed before, namely, other individuals in all of their particularity.

As I argue below, *Achtung*, for Murdoch, is a feeling of respect for other people, and she thinks tragedy gives us *Achtung*. However, as Murdoch explains, in order to evidence this claim, she needs to show that Kant’s theory of *Achtung* is inadequate. Furthermore, in order to connect



aesthetic experience with what she is calling tragic freedom, she needs to transform and transfer the core of Kant's theory of the sublime into his theory of art (S&G, 46).

Murdoch notes that "Kant's reflections on genius respond to the need to see art as capable of engaging with an intellectual grasp of the world." However, she thinks that Kant's theory of art is inadequate because a proper theory of art must "'account' for tragedy, for poetry;" she specifically states that "tragedies are plays written by great poets" (MGM 93). Interestingly, she goes on to quote Kant's remark in section 53 of the *Critique of Judgment* that "among all the arts poetry holds the highest rank." While this may seem strange at first glance, I suggest the following interpretation: Murdoch wants to make clear that she does indeed recognize that Kant sees poetry as the highest art, but she wants to argue that he has not properly or fully accounted for it in the context of tragedy. In order to do so, she argues, a theory of art must let tragedy join the sublime and the beautiful together:

The sublime is the proud energetic fear with which the rational being faces the contingent dreadfulness of the world. The beautiful (says Kant) is the experience of a pleasing formal completeness in a purposeless conceptless object. The sublime is a special exercise of reason, a kind of moral adventure. The beautiful is a free play of the imagination in a frolic with the understanding, working sensuously upon an empty notion of an object offered by the latter. The concepts are dissimilar; the sublime is moral, the beautiful is aesthetic. We cannot separate the tragic experience from our general sense of humanity. Kant elevates the noble sublime above the playful beautiful. Tragedy would then be a (unique) moralizing or redeeming of the beautiful. Only within high morality can the spectacle of terrible human suffering become a thing of beauty (MGM 100).

I mentioned that Murdoch wants to show that Kant's theory of *Achtung* is inadequate. With this in mind, Murdoch argues that Kant's theory of sublimity will not suffice as it stands. In particular, she thinks that Kant makes a wrong move in connecting the sublime with reverence

for human reason. This connection, Murdoch argues, makes sublimity something about the subject encountering itself; that is, what we have is a theory of sublimity that is a theory about reason being reminded of its own freedom. This is problematic, Murdoch suggests, because it does not allow for any connection between experiences of sublimity and a certain kind of conflict that takes place between human individuals; she insists that when sublimity is understood properly, it is seen as relevant to this kind of conflict.

Specifically, Murdoch wants to show that the freedom that is connected with an experience of sublimity should be understood as “tragic freedom” – the “exercise of the imagination in an irreconcilable conflict of dissimilar beings” (SOG, 217). We should understand sublimity, and the boundlessness that it involves, as representative of the infiniteness of the task of particular individuals trying to understand each other – not just as rational beings that are similar to oneself, as Kant would suggest – but as beings distinct and other than oneself.

Murdoch wants to show that morality involves becoming aware of free persons in conflict, and that tragedy, in particular, provokes such an awareness. With this in mind, Murdoch’s aim is to retain the “core” of Kant’s theory of sublimity, and transfer it into his theory of art. She argues that the result will be that the essence of morality – the perception of individuals and “the realization that something other than oneself is real” – will also be the essence of tragedy, and art and morals will be united. Thus, at this point one might wonder what, exactly, Murdoch’s view of sublimity is, and why, exactly, she wants to keep the core of the Kantian sublime.

### C. *ACHTUNG* AND ITS EFFECTS

Murdoch sees value in Kant's theory of sublimity insofar as she agrees that the limitlessness of sublimity is connected with morality. She suggests that in this way the sublime has "a superior spiritual function," and it is able to connect us with experiences that are "on a higher level [than base desires and inclinations]," i.e. moral experiences (MGM, 9). However, Murdoch interprets the value of sublimity differently from Kant: She argues that the object of our feeling of elation at the limitlessness of sublimity is the unlimited variety of free individuals. Sublimity takes us from *Achtung* to respect for others, and it points to the infiniteness of that task of particular individuals trying to understand each other as different from oneself. Sublimity makes us aware of the possibility of overcoming oneself, which, she argues, is the infinite task of love. What Murdoch wants to transform is the Kantian idea that sublimity provokes "pride in our free moral nature" (MGM, 9). She argues that:

[Kant] attempts to make the act of moral judgment an instantiating of a timeless form of rational activity; and it is this, this empty demand for a total order, which we are required to respect in each other. Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts (S&G, 51).

As Murdoch's essay, the "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited"<sup>153</sup> brings out, Murdoch wants to show that what sublimity provokes is not a sense of the power of Reason, as Kant suggests, but instead a sense of humility and "the un-self-centered...agnosticism which goes with tolerance" (SBR, 283). Thus, while Murdoch and Kant share the view that the connection between sublimity and morality is grounded in its limitlessness, an important distinction between the Kantian connection between sublimity and morality and the Murdochian

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<sup>153</sup> This essay is meant as a companion essay to "The Sublime and the Good." See Justin Brookes' *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, pg. 32

connection between sublimity and morality can be drawn: Kant means to argue that sublimity carries us to look away from self-love and self-conceit and toward the moral law in everyone. On the other hand, Murdoch means to argue that sublimity carries us to look away from ourselves and toward others conceived of as they really are – as individual beings with their own particularities.

First, Kant recognizes that as rational agents, we have some appreciation of what is required by morality. On the other hand, as rational animals, we are affected by the inclinations or sensuous desires. Thus, things that bring about well-being and comfort and sustenance, will be liable to appear to us as good even if morality requires that we not engage in them. This means that within our nature, there will be certain competing conceptions of good. In other words, a conflict is embedded in our nature as human beings. Yet, we are aware of our obligation to the moral law, which commands us to fulfill our duty even in the case that doing so requires a struggle. We must not attempt to excuse ourselves “from our duty when circumstances make it difficult for us to perform it.” Kant recognizes that it is sometimes permissible to act in accordance with our inclinations (i.e., when the moral law does not direct us to do otherwise). When we do this, we are acting in accordance with what he calls “self-love” – that is, we take it that some object of inclination ought to be pursued. The point is that self-love is acceptable so long as it does not conflict with the moral law. However, there are times when we desire to act in accordance with our inclinations even when the moral law has directed us to do otherwise. In this kind of case, self-love has given rise to a certain illusion; we develop a mistaken supposition that

there is something more important about ourselves, personally, than moral action. This illusion, Kant argues, is called “self-conceit” (CPrR 5:74).<sup>154</sup>

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that the consciousness of the moral law “strikes down self-conceit” (5:73) and “humiliates every human being when he compares it with the sensible propensity of his nature” (5:74). This awareness “deprives self-conceit of its illusion.” *Achtung* is, in a word, an attraction to what makes it possible for us to overcome the inclinations and sensuous desires; it is something that humiliates a part of our nature, and this humiliation is difficult to endure. Awareness of the moral law is not something that is easily experienced. It is difficult, and painful: Kant uses the following example to shed light on this point:

Before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself my spirit bows, whether I want it or whether I do not and I hold my head ever so high, that he may not overlook my superior position. Why is this? His example holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my conduct, and I see observance of that law and hence its practicability proved before me in fact. (CPrR 5:76-77)

The thought here is that in this man, I perceive a higher degree of character than that of which I am aware in myself; that is I perceive the common man’s moral superiority. Kant wants to show that when I observe the moral law in a humble and common human being, who is comparatively less well-off than myself, I am humiliated. In fact, I feel badly; the experience is not a fun one. The humiliation involved in this experience is caused both by the fact that this man, like me, is subject to the moral law, and by my realization that this man conforms to the moral law better than I have done. This experience is painful; “it strikes down my pride” (CPrR

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<sup>154</sup> All of my references to this text are to Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5:77). Hence, this consciousness of the moral law is a humbling experience. Though I held my head high, “my spirit bowed,” as a result of *Achtung*.

Kant argues that we call something sublime because it brings to the forefront our power to regard the objects of our natural concerns (our inclinations) as small and comparatively unimportant (28:262). Sublimity gives us the feeling of *Achtung* (this happens when the formal condition of practical cognition and its feeling of *Achtung* are aesthetically fulfilled) which is the feeling that “strikes down self-conceit.” Insofar as sublimity also gives us a feeling of elation as we experience the boundless and limitless, it has the unique power of making *Achtung* palatable to us. By sublimity, we are elated in the midst of difficulty, and we are given strength.

Thus, part of Kant’s connection between sublimity and morality can be found in the analogy between an experience of sublimity and the experience of the humble, common man that I noted above: Both of these experiences give rise to a humbling of the selfish parts of us. The advantage of having an experience of sublimity is that it makes *Achtung* pleasurable, even though it is a negative pleasure. This attracts us to an awareness of the proper relationship between our cognitive faculties, and hence, can attract us to moral action vs. immoral action.

However, Murdoch wants to get something different out of a theory regarding the relationship between sublimity and morality. She wants to argue in favor of a connection between sublimity and an awareness of other people and their individual particularities – a connection between sublimity and human conflict, and the realization that other people (in addition to ourselves) must embark on a moral pilgrimage that is difficult for them, due to their different points of view; indeed, “it matters how we see other people” (MGM 463). We must see

that other people, as well as ourselves, are “constantly in process of recognizing the falseness of our ‘goods’, and the unimportance of what we deem important” (MGM 430).

Murdoch does not agree with Kant that sublimity makes us aware of the moral law in all people; rather she argues that sublimity makes us aware of those people themselves. While Kant acknowledges that rational beings have lower-level inclinations in addition to the rational part, and that *Achtung* brings us to overcome those lower parts of ourselves, he does not argue that it brings us to recognize that other people also have them.

Yet, this is the very point that Murdoch wants us to recognize in a theory of sublimity. For her, instead of recognizing something about ourselves (i.e., that we have the faculty of reason), we need to recognize something outside of ourselves, namely, other individuals, and their situations. This involves being humbled, which involves overcoming oneself and attending to particular individuals outside of or other than oneself. Thus, as I discussed earlier, this is why Murdoch wants to connect sublimity with the art of tragedy: Tragedy shows us the way things really are: Tragedy does not console us. It shows us the truth about death and it breaks down the ego. Tragedy shows us that reality for us as human beings is uncomfortable and full of conflict and misery, and that the human condition is frail and transient. We begin to notice others when our egos are defeated, and we begin to grasp the fact that “others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves” (SOG, 216). It is at this point that we are able to see that those particular individuals should be given our loving attention.

Indeed, if we briefly recall the M and D example, we can reasonably say that M – in attending to D – is humbled: she is drawn to see that she could have been wrong. Indeed, she sees that she might have been previously, egotistically focused on promoting her relationship

with her son, or something else about herself, rather than seeing the truth about D. When she eventually, correctly relates to D, she has looked away from her own selfish concerns and, instead, toward D.

Murdoch wants us to exercise loving attention toward individuals other than ourselves, and, as I have shown previously, to truly ‘see’ them. Murdoch insists that we need to see the conflict among individuals, and recognize that it is part of morality. Thus, in order to connect this point with a theory of art, Murdoch wants to transform Kantian sublimity into something that can be applicable to her theory of tragedy. It is that transformed theory of sublimity, then, that she wants to transfer into a theory of art. This transformation will in turn ground the connection between art and morals.

### C. CONCLUSION

My arguments in Chapters 1 and 2 shed light on interesting connections between the moral training that occurs as a result of an experience of beauty via art in Plato’s *Republic* and Kant’s discussion of experiences of beauty, and the moral growth that occurs as a result of erotic experiences of beauty in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and as a result of experiences of the sublime in Kant’s theory. In this chapter, I have discussed the place that Iris Murdoch’s aesthetics takes among Plato’s and Kant’s theories.

Plato, Kant, and Murdoch all share the general view that experiences of beauty cannot and should not be divorced from morality. Specifically, I have shown that Plato distinguishes between two kinds of experiences of beauty – experiences of beauty via art and erotic



experiences of beautiful people – which respectively give rise to different kinds of moral reformation.

I have argued that Kant, like Plato, distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetic experience. He wants to show that the experience of beauty is especially capable of preparing us for loving something without interest (29:267). On the other hand, an experience of the sublime best captures what Kant calls ‘moral feeling,’ and hence, it is the sublime that teaches us to “esteem something even against our interest” (29:267). The sublime is what genuinely characterizes moral dignity through a presentation of reason’s dominance over sensibility (29:269). I have argued that this kind of moral context is more akin Plato’s discussion of the erotic experience of a beautiful person than to the kind of moral training that Plato describes in the *Republic* or the kind of moral improvement that Kant alludes to in his discussion of an experience of beauty in nature.

Thus, for Plato and Kant there are two kinds of aesthetic experience, each with its own respective morally reformatory effect. However, Plato does not speak of the sublime (while Kant does), and Kant does not speak of erotic experiences of beauty (while Plato does). Yet, the effects that Plato suggests result from an erotic experience of beauty (in particular in the *Phaedrus*) very much resemble the effects that Kant describes of an experience of sublimity.

Murdoch recognizes and discusses all of the following kinds of aesthetic experiences as experiences that may promote moral transformation: beauty in nature and art, erotic experiences of beautiful people, and sublimity in art (especially tragedy) and nature. She maintains that moral training, and the sort of reformation that results from Plato’s erotic experiences of beautiful people, as well as the triumph over the ego, may all result from all or any of those kinds of

experiences. Some of these experiences might be more apt than others to teach us about certain aspects of moral reformation. For example, an erotic experience of beauty might be especially capable of teaching us love for other people, insofar as it teaches us to appreciate the subjectivity of another individual. Tragedy is especially capable of showing us the idea of death, which has a particularly powerful impact against the ego.

Like Plato, Murdoch distinguishes between good and bad art, and she argues that while bad art may lead to immoral action, good art may be used as an instrument in a person's moral development. Unlike Plato, however, Murdoch finds a place for erotic experiences of beauty, as well as sublimity, in art. Like Kant, Murdoch argues that there is a symbolic relationship between beauty and morality. However, while Kant and Murdoch both have specific theories of sublimity, Murdoch argues that an experience of sublimity does not give rise to the recognition of one's own faculty of reason, as Kant suggests, but rather to the recognition of other individuals, and the realization of human conflict.

Furthermore, I have suggested that erotic experiences of beautiful people might entail an even more powerful sort of moral training than experiences of beauty via art, from the Murdochian point of view: since in the case of an erotic experience of beauty, the beauty toward which one is focusing her full attention is actually present in another human being. Moreover, since attending to other human beings justly and lovingly is the point of moral progress on Murdoch's view, erotic experiences of beauty might be the closest experience one can have to practicing the sort of attention that she advocates.

In the latter part of this chapter, I discussed points of connection between Murdoch's and Kant's views of aesthetics. Both Murdoch and Kant argue that experiences of beauty make it

possible for us to see something other than our own interests or inclinations. Also, they both recognize a symbolic relationship between experiences of beauty and morality. For Kant, the symbolism is more formal, in the relationship between the cognitive faculties during aesthetic and moral judgments. For Murdoch beauty shows us the gap between “self” and world – it commands us to contemplate the other. It does not console us, or build up our pride, or feed the illusions that we create of ourselves. This is analogous to the way in which we ought to behave toward other individuals: we ought to contemplate them in their individual particularities, and we ought to look and look again, giving them our full attention.

However, Murdoch disagrees with Kant when it comes to sublimity. She insists that it is a mistake to argue that sublimity makes us aware of the moral law in all people; instead, Murdoch argues that sublimity makes us aware of those people themselves. Murdoch insists that Kant does not properly account for the conflict among individuals, and recognize that it is part of morality. As I have shown, she claims that a proper theory of aesthetics must account for the conflict among individuals. Thus, in order to connect this point with a theory of art, Murdoch transforms Kantian sublimity into something that is applicable to her theory of tragedy. She then transfers this transformed theory of sublimity into her theory of art. Thus, in Murdochian aesthetics, unlike Kantian aesthetics, sublimity is brought to the context of art. In this way, experiences of art not only give rise to moral training, but they also give us the feeling of *Achtung*.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **MOTIVATIONAL INTERNALISM ABOUT THE GOOD AND THE TWO-TIER SELFLESS PERSPECTIVE**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In this dissertation I am concerned with the connection between the aesthetic and the moral. Up to this point, I have given an analysis of the way in which this connection figures in the views of Plato, Kant, and Iris Murdoch. In this chapter and the subsequent one, I will sketch a theory of my own that has commonalities with their views. I am going to focus on three interrelated theses, one in moral psychology, one in normative value theory, and one in the intersection between them. The first thesis I shall defend is motivational internalism about the good, and the second thesis is the substantive claim that the moral is, in fact, good. Therefore, when one understands the moral as good she has motivation towards it. However, humans do not necessarily have such an understanding. A person may believe that something is morally required without believing it to be good. With this in mind, the third thesis is that art may help us to see the moral as good by giving us a new kind of perspective – a new point of view from which one understands that there is a higher self.

In what follows, I will first make some initial remarks about the nature of internalism and moral realism, and summarize Plato's, Kant's, and Murdoch's views of moral motivation in terms of contemporary views. Then, I will sketch my own view that motivational judgment internalism can and does coexist with an objective Good, where goodness is not a function of one's desires.

## II. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ABOUT INTERNALISM AND MORAL REALISM

Motivational value judgment internalism is the view that judgments of value are accompanied by motivation. Two versions of motivational value judgment internalism include prudential internalism<sup>155</sup> – the view that judgments that something is good for the agent are accompanied by motivation – and moral internalism<sup>156</sup> – the view that moral judgments are accompanied by motivation. I endorse prudential internalism, but not moral internalism. In addition, however, I also endorse the following substantive moral claim: Things that are morally valuable are also prudentially valuable. I shall explain this thoroughly in section F. However, in this present section, I need to make some preliminary distinctions and clarifications regarding internalism and moral realism.

First, motivational value judgment internalism provides answers to questions such as what, exactly, the connection is between value judgments and motivation, and whether such judgments are necessarily motivating. In response to these questions, philosophers primarily argue either in support of or against motivational value judgment internalism. Second, moral internalism claims that a person cannot sincerely make a moral judgment without being motivated at least to some degree to act on her judgment. That is, if I sincerely judge that I morally should A, then I have a motive to A. For example, one version of this view is that reasons must explain actions, but in order to explain actions, one must appeal to motivations. An explanation that cites motivations is an internal – not external – reasons explanation.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> A recent defender of this view is Jyl Gentzler, “Attractions and Delights of Goodness.” We might also call this motivational prudential judgment internalism, but I have shortened it to prudential internalism here.

<sup>156</sup> Some recent defenders of this view include Broome, “Reason and Motivation,” Smith, “The Moral Problem,” Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” Leben & Wilkens, “Pushing the Intuitions behind Moral Internalism,” and Worsnip & Phillips, “Motivating Internalism”. Although this view has been given different names in the past, and while it would be consistent to refer to it more specifically as motivational moral judgment internalism, I have shortened the phrase for my purposes here.

<sup>157</sup> See Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Third, “strong moral internalism” has been the common name for the view that, “necessarily, the person who makes a sincere moral judgment will be overridingly motivated to comply with her judgment.”<sup>158</sup> Most contemporary views of motivational judgment internalism are forms of what has been called “weak moral internalism,” which allows that “even though, necessarily, the person who makes a sincere moral judgment will feel some motivation to comply with it, that motivation can be overridden by conflicting desires and defeated by a variety of mental maladies, such as depression and weakness of will.”<sup>159</sup>

A familiar debate, and one that is relevant to my purposes here, involves the question as to whether only pre-existing desires and wants motivate, or whether beliefs can be a source of motivation, possibly by generating desires. The former – the idea that mere belief cannot be motivating – is a popular tenet of Humean moral psychology. According to those who hold this Humean view, the internalist thesis that value judgments are accompanied by motivation can be explained in the following way: Since only pre-existing desires and wants motivate, and since all value judgments are accompanied by motivation, all value judgments reflect pre-existing desires. In other words, in this view, the motivation that accompanies moral and other value judgments is produced by previously existing desires. This involves a constraint on the moral because moral judgments are determined by desires and wants; i.e., morality is something that is dependent upon the agent doing the judging. In light of this, internalism is frequently allied with subjectivism.

To expand on this point, a case in which internalism is tied with subjectivism is a case in which a person holds a subjective theory about the good; that is, when a person maintains that

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<sup>158</sup> Rosati, Connie S., "Moral Motivation", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/moral-motivation/> .

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

one's desires or preferences somehow determine what is of value, prudentially, morally or in some other way for that particular person. This view suggests that our values and obligations are based upon our own motives, actual and potential, and that value consists in the satisfaction of desires; what is intrinsically valuable for a person must connect with what he finds compelling or attractive. An individual's good must be "made for" or "suited to" her, but this is only possible if that which is valuable for her is within her motivational capacity.<sup>160</sup>

However, Murdoch, Kant, and Plato do not accept the Humean principle that only pre-existing desires and wants are motivating. In connection with Murdoch, Kant, and Plato, my view is that the Good has an authority that is independent of our wants and desires, and that motivation does not determine or change what is good. I maintain that motivation need not be derived from desires that we previously possess. Rather, desires arise after the Good is recognized. In this sense, I am going to insist that prudential internalism can and does coexist with an objective Good, where goodness is not determined by one's desires. My view is, therefore, a non-subjectivist theory about the Good. I suggest that we understand the relationship between desires/motivations and the good in the following way: It is not that my desires and motivations toward something make it good for me; rather I desire/am motivated toward something because I believe it is good. According to the moral objectivist, the moral subjectivist

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<sup>160</sup> See Peter Railton, "Moral Realism", *Philosophical Review* 95, pgs. 163–207, and "Some Questions About the Justification of Morality," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6, pgs. 27–53. Also, Connie Rosati holds a version of motivational internalism based on a subjectivist theory of the good: "There is a necessary connection between motivation and normative status ... Something X can have a certain normative status N only if someone A would be motivated by it in sense M. Thus, depending upon the area of normative assessment, something can be a reason or an obligation or a value of a certain kind only if that thing could appropriately motivate the appropriate person or persons. Proponents of [such] internalist accounts of a person's good hold that something can be intrinsically good for an individual person A only if she herself would desire it (or desire to desire it) at least under suitable ideal conditions." See Rosati, "Internalism and the Good," *Ethics* 106 (1996), pg. 298

is “putting the cart before the horse.”<sup>161</sup> It is not that goodness is determined by my desires; rather, some desires are generated by perceptions of goodness. With this in mind, my view will involve the following two claims: (1) Thoughts about the Good can produce desires and motivations that are not derived from pre-existing ones, and (2) Desires are products of perception or belief about value.

I have only given a brief introduction of my view here. However, before discussing my view in more depth, I shall turn to a specific consideration of where Plato’s, Kant’s, and Murdoch’s views are situated in the discussion.

### III. PLATO AND INTERNALISM

In Chapter 1, I argued that Plato holds the Socratic thesis regarding motivation and that in dialogues from all periods he endorses the view that all desire is for things qua good (we desire things that we perceive as or think to be good because we perceive them as or think them to be good). This reading involves the theory that the desires of lower parts of the soul as well as those of the rational part involve and depend on apprehensions of their objects as good, which is commonly referred to as ‘good-dependence.’ Socrates states at *Republic* 505d-e that

Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is something but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs it has about other things, and so it misses the benefit, if any that even those other things may give.

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<sup>161</sup> See Jyl Gentzler, “The Attractions of Delight and Goodness,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2004): 357, for another example of this sort of view.



I argued that this passage should be interpreted to mean that each part of the soul desires what it takes to be good and that everyone pursues things under the guise of the good, no matter which part of her soul rules her. My reading of Plato's view entails that only a rational-part-ruling soul can understand what goodness truly consists in, and that souls that are ruled by the lower parts err on account of confused notions of the good. I argued that it is this kind of confused notion of the good that gives rise to (and accounts for) the sorts of akratic actions that Plato describes in the *Republic*.

According to Plato, our subjective perceptions of goodness are reflections through which true Goodness shows itself. Thus, a kind of subjective pull begins our awareness of Goodness, which in turn may optimally lead to being well-off (leading a good life). While the ideal function of this pull would be to provide us with a glimpse of true Goodness, such glimpses can be distorted: The lower parts of the soul sometimes perceive vicious things as good. I have argued that the appetite and spirit are confined to perception, and that the difference between these two parts (the non-rational parts) and the rational part of the soul is that the non-rational part accepts appearances unreflectively and the rational part – in its ability to calculate and reflect on appearances – transcends them. The consequence of the appetite and spirited parts being cognitively limited to perception is that the appearances they accept will be false at worst and reflective of – but removed from – the truth at best. This makes them cognitively and ethically handicapped. As a result, they pursue the worthless or the bad in the worst case scenario, or in the best case, while they cannot perceive it, they can be trained to track the higher value that reason calculates as good.<sup>162</sup> Thus, while it is possible for the non-rational parts of the soul to

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<sup>162</sup> Though my own view is that an understanding of goodness enlightens our view of the moral, I do not mean to suggest that once a person has such an understanding, she no longer has what Plato calls appetite and spirit. It is not as if one becomes a different kind of being, who lacks such elements once she is enlightened. Rather, she is better

mistake mere appearances of goodness for true goodness, when our desires and appetites function in harmony with reason and spirit – when there is a proper interplay between the three parts – glimpses of goodness will be ones of the true Good.

Furthermore, “there are three pleasures corresponding to the three parts of the soul, one peculiar to each part, and similarly with desires...” (*Republic* 580d). When the soul works in harmony, it enjoys the truest possible pleasure:

When the entire soul follows the philosophic part, and there is no civil war in it, each part of it does its own work exclusively and is just, and in particular it enjoys its own pleasures, the best and truest pleasures possible for it (*Republic* 586e-587a).

Jyl Gentzler draws on this passage as she argues in support of her own view that a Platonic account of prudential<sup>163</sup> value is superior to a subjectivist account of prudential value.<sup>164</sup> Gentzler’s following remark sheds light on the connection between pleasure and the properly functioning soul:

...human beings are such that they are motivated to pursue the functioning of the parts of their souls through the mechanisms of desire and pleasure. When the different parts of the soul function harmoniously, the subject experiences pleasure...all human beings have a natural and necessary desire to pursue the functioning of the parts of their souls...human beings are such that the functioning of at least some of our parts is under our control, and the mechanisms by which they assert this control involve pleasure and desire. Therefore, human beings could not be well off, that is, could not be such that all of their human parts function harmoniously together, without

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able to focus her desires once she understands the Good. The more that she understands that the moral is good for her, the more she will understand which desires she ought (prudentially) to satisfy. Thus, I do endorse a certain sort of this Platonic notion of “tracking.”

<sup>163</sup> Gentzler argues that a thing x is good for another thing y qua F, if and only if x contributes to y’s oneness (completeness, unity) as an F. Prudential value, in her view, is the value that x has for a sort of y. See Gentzler, “The Attractions of Delight and Goodness,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2004)

<sup>164</sup> Gentzler, pg. 366

experiencing pleasure or without having this internal harmony as one of their deepest desires.<sup>165</sup>

In Plato's view, there are certain pleasures that we experience when the parts of our souls perform their respective functions, and these pleasures count as prudential, since they (together with certain desires) are part of what motivates the harmonious functioning of the whole soul. When one has a harmoniously functioning soul, she will experience pleasure (*Rep.* 586e-587a); i.e., pleasure accompanies goodness.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, the harmoniously functioning soul is a virtuous soul, and virtue, as Socrates puts it, "is a well-being of the soul" (445e):

[The virtuous person] puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale – high, low, and middle. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious (*Rep.* 443d).

Socrates goes on to state that any action that "preserves [a person's] inner harmony and helps achieve it" will be "just and fine" (*Rep.* 443e). The virtuous person is constituted such that she sees good things, and in this way, as she judges them to be good, she will desire them. Put more colloquially, when the soul is working properly, the things that strike a person as good, are in fact good things. Hence, the harmoniously functioning soul directs a person toward the Good. The harmonious soul gives a person the point of view from which she may also see that the moral is good. This is the point of view from which morally required things can be perceived as good. A moral judgment made from this point of view will involve a belief about the Good that is derived in a certain way (formed under reason in a properly ordered soul), and hence, motivation toward the moral will be a subset, as it were, of motivation toward the Good.

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<sup>165</sup> Gentzler, pg. 365

<sup>166</sup> This point is related to the pleasures of the different parts of the soul in the following way: Those respective pleasures themselves are not bad for a person; i.e., the pleasures that come from eating, sex, and being honored are not vicious in themselves. They can become bad for a person when pursued in the wrong objects, excessively or deficiently. When the soul is in proper order, each part will pursue its respective pleasure appropriately. This gives rise to the greater pleasure that Socrates talks about at *Rep.* 586e-587a.

On the other hand, the soul of an unjust person is in discord; that is, all of its parts pull in different directions (444b). With this and the above passages in mind, it makes sense to suggest that for Plato when we call something prudential or, on the other hand, harmful for a person, this involves some notion of what it is for a person to be “one” – unified and complete – vs. in conflict; i.e., when different parts of the soul are pulling in different directions. If a person is in the former situation, she is well off, and if she is in the latter situation, she is badly off. Thus, having a harmoniously functioning soul both is prudential and involves virtuous activity. Furthermore, as I suggested above, when one’s soul is in this state of harmony, she is capable of seeing that virtuous activity (the moral) is prudential.

I should also note that a reference to desires and pleasure enters the Platonist (realist) theory of value, but not as an explanation of the nature of value. By a “realist theory of value,” I mean a theory that claims there are facts and properties about value, the existence and nature of which are independent of people’s beliefs and attitudes. This kind of theory holds that there are genuine claims about value and that those claims are true or false. If they are true claims, they have a kind of ontological robustness: In particular, they are not reducible to desires and they are mind-independent. These claims are facts about value.<sup>167</sup>

In Plato’s view, it is part of our nature to grasp the objective Good. We have cognitive access to the Good in the form of (often distorted) perceptions and beliefs about it.<sup>168</sup> These cognitions have a conative dimension; that is, they are (or lead to) desires. In the best case scenario, our motivations and desires will compel us toward the true Good of which they allow a

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<sup>167</sup> See Graham Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire*, (NY: Oxford University Press: 2005)

<sup>168</sup> A distorted perception of the good is one in which the appetite or spirit has incorrectly perceived something as good, and reason may have either miscalculated the thing as good or not calculated the thing as good. A clear/true perception of the good is one in which the thing perceived as/calculated as good is actually good.

glimpse. However, in some cases, this glimpse may be a quite distorted perception of goodness – a mere appearance of the Good. This is caused when the soul is ruled by the lower parts, which sometimes mistakenly interpret appearances of the good as truly good things. Only if one's soul is properly ordered and ruled by the rational part, will she understand the Good. It is at this point that she will really see what is truly Good vs. what merely appears to be good. In either case, however, one's desires for good (whether real or apparent) results from some kind of perception of that good.

Notably, while it is not the case that all sense perception involves illusions, and analogously, not all passions of the lower parts of the soul are vicious – that is, not all of them lead people astray – none of them can get past appearances of the truth. Only reason can do this. Thus, the lower parts of the soul grasp mere images/appearances, whereas the rational part can calculate, and so it desires what it believes to be best overall.

While the objects of the lower parts of the soul may not always be good things, this does not necessarily mean that the motivations are independent of the Good. Seeking the good but reaching only an appearance of it gives rise to desires for things that only appear but are not good. Hence, it is possible to pursue the good and, at the same, time be motivated toward bad things.

In short, for Plato, we are all motivated toward the Good (each part of the soul seeks it, and judgments or beliefs that something is good are accompanied by motivation toward that object). However, we may be motivated toward bad things when the lower parts of the soul mistake mere appearances of the Good for the real Good. Or, the reasoning part of the soul itself may sometimes reach an inaccurate view of what is good.

For example, suppose that a person is not motivated to help someone else, or to tell the truth or to refrain from drinking too much wine. This can be explained in the following way: a person who is not motivated toward the true Good has a mistaken view of the Good; that is, she is motivated toward what she believes to be good, but she lacks an understanding of what is really Good.

When reason forms a conception of the Good, it may be autonomous or it may be adopted from one of the other parts. The latter may occasion an inaccurate view of the Good: When the lower parts are motivated toward the apparent good and reason accepts the content of value that the other parts have supplied, reason mistakes the apparent good for the real Good. For example, drinking wine in excess will, on this view, result from the misperception that drinking in excess is good. Here, a person fails to understand what is truly Good (drinking in moderation rather than in excess) because the lower parts of the soul have taken the lead and drawn her toward that which they have mistaken as Good. Thus, she is drawn toward something that is not good rather than toward the true Good: She will not drink in moderation, but will instead drink in excess because she believes doing so is good.

We might also consider cases of conflict. For example, there are cases in which one's desire for the good is outweighed by her desire to do something else: Perhaps my desire to help my elderly neighbor shovel her sidewalk after a snowstorm is outweighed by my desire to stay in bed. A person may rationally believe that one thing is good for her, but perceive through a lower part of the soul that something else is good. In this case, a person has a desire/motivation for the good, even though she may end up choosing to act on something else. This is like the case above where one is unaware of what the real Good is, but is motivated toward the apparent good insofar as both cases involve a motivation toward the Good. In a similar way, a person may rationally

believe that something is morally required, but choose to do something else that the lower parts of the soul are motivated toward. Thus, one's motivation to do the morally required may be outweighed by her motivation to do something else. In this case, one need not believe that that "something else" is in some way moral in order to be motivated toward it. However, one will believe that it is in some sense good, if she is motivated toward it. Furthermore, in the case where one's motivation to do the truly good is outweighed by something else, that something else is also a motivation toward the good – it is just an apparent good rather than the real good.

In light of this, and since he maintains that even though a person who makes a sincere judgment about the Good will feel some motivation to comply with it, one might suggest that Plato's view is a kind of prudential internalism. My own view regarding internalism and moral realism is in line with Plato's, as will become apparent in a later section.

Lastly, I mentioned above that, for Plato, subjective perceptions of goodness are reflections through which true Goodness shows itself, and that a kind of subjective pull begins our awareness of Goodness, which may lead to being well-off (leading a good life). To clarify this point, in both of the following cases – (1) Cases in which a person has a subjective pull toward an object that is truly Good, and (2) cases in which a person has a subjective pull toward an object that only appears to be good – a positive feeling is evoked in the subject.

To briefly recap, I have shown that, for Plato, the moral is prudentially good: acting virtuously promotes one's well-being. When a person's soul is in order, she will see what is truly good and, hence, will see that being virtuous and doing what is morally required is, in fact, good for her. I have also shown that Plato's view is a non-subjectivist theory about the Good; i.e., in his view, it is not that my desires and motivations toward something make it good for me.

Rather, I desire/am motivated toward something because I perceive/believe it to be good, and the Good is a real property. I have also suggested that we call Plato a prudential internalist because, while he maintains that all parts of the soul are motivated toward the good and always seek that which they perceive as good, he also maintains that it is possible for a person to seek bad things; some part of the soul may mistake the bad for the good and convince the whole soul to seek what it misperceives as good.

#### IV. KANT AND INTERNALISM

While there are many important distinctions between Plato's and Kant's views of moral motivation, Kant will agree with Plato that feeling is not the source of morality, moral motivation, and moral obligation. In Kant's view, reason is the source. Pure reason can "of itself, independently of anything empirical, determine the will" (CPrR 5: 42). Kant claims:

[Moral] actions ... need no recommendation from any subjective disposition or taste, so as to be looked upon with immediate favor and delight; nor do they need any immediate propensity or feeling for them; they present the will that practices them as the object of an immediate respect, and nothing but reason is required to impose them upon the will. (*Groundwork*, 4:435)<sup>169</sup>

Moral actions are taken simply because they accord with the moral law, they conform to duty. However, feeling does play a role in Kant's view: reason motivates us by way of feeling, specifically, a feeling of respect for the moral law. Indeed, Kant's remarks on *Achtung* (respect for the moral law) suggest that it is almost a felt aspect of the moral law itself:

an action from duty is to put aside entirely the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will; hence there is left for the will nothing that

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<sup>169</sup> All of my references to this text are to Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, (Cambridge University Press: 2012)



could determine it except objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for this practical law (*Groundwork*, 4:400).

However, *Achtung* is not a feeling akin to those of the inclinations. Rather it is a feeling that arises from reason. This feeling is not received via external influences, but instead it is a feeling that is created (seemingly self-created) out of a rational concept. Thus it is different from feelings of the inclinations. In the *Groundwork*, Kant states that determination of the will via the moral law and the consciousness of it is called respect. Respect is not the cause of the moral law; rather it is the effect of the moral law on the subject (*Groundwork* 4:401).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant describes *Achtung* as both painful and ennobling (CPrR 5:73). In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he claims that *Achtung* and love of human beings are kinds of feelings that we are made aware of by the moral law (MM 6:399).<sup>170</sup> These feelings are “moral endowments” that “lie at the basis of morality” – they are “subjective conditions of receptivity to the concept of duty” (MM 6:399). Furthermore, in his view, feelings of pleasure and pain are essential to human moral motivation.<sup>171</sup> He writes:

In order for a sensibly affected rational being to will that for which reason alone prescribes the ‘ought,’ it is admittedly required that his reason have the capacity to induce a feeling of pleasure or of delight in the fulfillment of duty, and thus there is required a causality of reason to determine sensibility in conformity with its principles (*Groundwork* 4:460).

For Kant, a moral judgment “can itself produce a sensation of pleasure or pain,” because this is how moral considerations motivate us. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, when Kant maintains that the moral law “strikes down self-conceit,” he wants to show that the feeling of

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<sup>170</sup> All of my references to this text are to Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996)

<sup>171</sup> See Paul Guyer, *Knowledge, Reason, and Taste: Kant’s Response to Hume*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), and *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010) for more discussion on this point.

pain that comes with this is part of moral motivation. *Achtung* has the power to remove the “resistance” (counterweight/hindrane) to the moral law that self-conceit presents. *Achtung* is thus the “esteemed equivalent to a positive furthering of [the moral law's] causality” (CPrR 5:75). One interesting aspect of *Achtung* is that it gives us the opportunity to feel pain or pleasure through moral deliberation.

As is well-known, Kant warns against the inclinations and desires: “unless reason holds the reins of government in his own hands, a human being's feelings and inclinations play the master over him” (MM 6:408). He encourages self-mastery and resistance of one’s passions. By self-mastery he means that one must “bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason's) control and so to rule over himself” (MM 6:408). The thought is not to do away with one’s feelings and inclinations, but instead to master them in ways that are compatible with morality. In his view, we can cultivate our emotions, and they are, to some extent, products of our choices.

Thus, this is a version of moral internalism (the view that a person cannot sincerely make a moral judgment without being motivated at least to some degree to adhere to her judgment). Kant maintains that it is possible to judge some act to be moral without having a pre-existing desire to do it. However, we cannot judge an action moral without the feeling of *Achtung*, which motivates us. Reason motivates the will, and it brings with it this special kind of feeling of respect for the moral law.

For Kant, acting from duty – as opposed to other motives, such as desires for pleasure – is only possible if the judgment that one has a duty has motivational power. Kant’s view is that judgments of duty do have this power, and in this sense, he has been called a deontic

internalist.<sup>172</sup> For Kant, judgments of duty have motivational power, and they (sufficiently) produce and explain the actions that follow from them.

Since the rules of duty are, in Kant's view, derived from reason and are also motivational, Kant is – as I noted above – committed to the view that reason is motivating. As I have discussed, however, Kant agrees that inclinations, in addition to reason, carry motivational force. For example, my desires will determine what I judge to be tasty, and sometimes the motivational force that is carried by desires will dominate the motivational force that is carried by reason. Indeed, Kant does not deny weakness of will, or that inclinations that are contrary to reason, may sometimes lead to actions. One might suggest that, for Kant, these instances of weakness of will are simply the product of irrationality, or cases in which one fails to exercise reasonable self-control. Thus, we might call Kant a weak moral internalist.<sup>173</sup>

I have not yet discussed the topic of prudential internalism, from Kant's point of view. In Chapter 2, I touched on the way in which *Achtung* is good for a person, via my discussion of the connection between aesthetic experience and moral improvement. In that chapter, and also in this present section, I have explained that, for Kant, proper moral decision making requires the authority of reason over the inclinations and over sensibility. Through *Achtung* – a respect for the moral law – reason may triumph over sensibility (in the case that one's inclinations are drawn to something that is contrary to reason).<sup>174</sup> In Kant's view, this is how we connect with supersensible freedom.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> See Robert Audi's *Practical Reason and Ethical Decision*, pg. 52-53.

<sup>173</sup> For more discussion on this topic, see Audi, pgs. 53-54

<sup>174</sup> I have noted in Chapter 2 that sometimes the inclinations accord with reason, and sometimes they do not. It is when they do not, that reason must dominate them. In any case, reason should have primary authority.

<sup>175</sup> See Chapter 2 for a full explanation of this.

However, as I have mentioned, desires and inclinations do play a role in Kant's moral picture: Our desires and inclinations are part of human nature, and reason has "a commission from the side of his sensibility [to satisfy desires and inclinations]" (CPrR, 5:61). This is because we are beings with needs, insofar as we "belong to the sensible world" (CPrR, 5:61). In other words, even though I ought to fulfill my moral duty, this is not to say that I should no longer eat or drink; taking those actions is part of what it is to be a human being in the sensible world. Importantly, however, in light of the fact that we have these desires and inclinations, Kant maintains that we come to form an idea of what it would be to have a maximal satisfaction of all of them. This idea of maximal satisfaction is what Kant calls happiness (CPrR, 5:61, 22, 124). Happiness, combined with another key idea in Kant's moral theory, is what connects morality and *Achtung* with the prudential.

The other key idea that we form, according to Kant, is an idea of a moral world that is a supersensible kingdom of ends, in which everyone acts only in accordance with maxims that can be universal laws. This perfectly moral world is something that, by itself, cannot constitute our "whole and complete good...even in the judgment of an impartial reason;" it is part of our nature to need happiness (CPrR, 5:110, 25). Moreover, happiness by itself cannot be unconditionally good, because moral virtue is a condition of worthiness to be happy (CPrR, 5:111). Thus, the complete end, as it were – the highest good (the *summum bonum*) for human beings – must combine both virtue and happiness:

Virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the *highest good* of a possible world (CPrR 5:110–111).

Kant goes on to say at 5:125 that “we ought to strive to promote the highest good;” that is, it is our duty to do so. In his view, it is a part of human reasoning that we see/approach all of our particular duties as things that lead up to the highest good (CPrR, 6:5). This means that our duty to promote the highest good is really the sum of all our duties derived from the moral law. In Kant’s view, we have to conceive of the highest good as being possible to reach, if we are to do our duty of promoting it.

However, we may fail at doing our duty. We have a choice about whether to conceive of the highest good as possible, to regard it as impossible, or to remain noncommittal (CPrR 5:144–145). We can fulfill our duty of promoting the highest good only by choosing to conceive of the highest good as possible, because we cannot promote any end without believing that it is possible to achieve that end (CPrR, 5:122).

In light of this, we might call Kant a prudential internalist. In his view, thinking something as good, as it were, involves a necessary motivation towards it – one that results from respect for the moral law. One may experience weakness of will, however, in cases in which the motivation given by her inclinations may overpower the motivation given by reason. Thus, in addition to being a weak moral internalist, Kant also endorses a kind of prudential internalism. As I shall explain in section F, my view regarding internalism can be distinguished from Kant’s insofar as I endorse prudential internalism, but not moral internalism.

## **V. MURDOCH AND MORAL MOTIVATION**

In Murdoch’s view, our ability to form accurate moral beliefs is part of the capacity to love and to truly see – to exercise attention. The central concept of morality is “the individual

thought of as knowable by love” (SOG 30), and love is the essence of moral knowledge. For Murdoch, just and loving attention to other individuals plays a key role in understanding moral requirements. A moral person, in Murdoch’s view, is one who is aware of other people’s individual particularities and is moved by such an awareness.

Murdoch, like Plato and Kant, does not deny that emotions and desires play a role in our moral psychology. In her view, when one has the perspective from which she can make proper moral judgments, she will be motivated to do them. That is, taking the moral perspective and practicing loving attention occasions proper moral judgments, which are accompanied by the intent to be virtuous (SOG 66). Murdoch does not mean to suggest that moral judgments are any kind of desire or emotion, rather they may give rise to desires and emotions.

A main thesis in *The Sovereignty of Good* is that true vision – which makes the self seem less interesting – occasions right conduct (SOG 66). Moral knowledge means not only “seeing” others correctly and empathetically: correct seeing gives rise to proper motivation. Thus, moral awareness is a kind of vision – a cognitive vision. One way to put this is that moral awareness is “a genuine belief-state directed on a real object of knowledge...”<sup>176</sup> This object may be another individual, or it may be the Good itself. The notion of what it means to look at the Good itself is quite obscure in Murdoch’s work. However, given the arguments that I made in Chapter 3, a reasonable way to interpret this is as follows: we begin on an egotistical, base level, looking toward the fulfillment of desires. We acknowledge the objects of our desires as goods. Then, as we operate in the world and look around at other people doing the same, we are made aware of, and become able to recognize, moral actions. Through social education and activity among other people we begin to realize a connection between moral action and goodness. Seeing imperfection

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<sup>176</sup> See A.E. Denham’s “Psychopathy, Empathy, and Moral Motivation,” *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher*, pg. 327.

in the world and seeing objects and actions that could be better – that are lacking – gives us the notion of moral perfection. We see that all of these moral actions might be situated on a sort of scale of goodness, and that we are all drawn to something better and more perfect. This allows us to eventually distinguish between agents who act and are in need of our action, and the perfect, and then the Good itself.

Indeed, Murdoch maintains that ordinary people must “attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of new and quite undreamt-of virtue” (SOG 99). This is the Good, and if a person is properly informed of the Good, she will have an attraction, a motivation toward it. Murdoch does not mean that all people are always motivated toward what is *truly* good. People are always motivated toward what they believe to be good for them, but unless they are properly informed of the real good, their other desires for egotistical ends may outweigh motivation toward the real good.

In the case of the moral, once we become aware of what morality requires, and when we properly understand it, we are drawn to it. However, if we are not looking away from ourselves and toward others or the good itself, it is possible that that our attraction/motivation to the moral may not defeat our other desires.

Thus, like Plato, Murdoch may be considered a prudential internalist: In her view, we are motivated toward what we believe to be good, and if we understand the real good, we will be motivated toward it. We may be motivated toward that which is immoral, but if so, it is because we believe those things to be good for us in some way. If we are motivated toward the moral, it is because we understand that it is good.

## VI. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MOTIVATIONAL JUDGMENT INTERNALISM AND OBJECTIVE GOODNESS

In this section, I shall develop a view that is in the same family with Plato, Kant, and Murdoch. From all three of their views, I want to preserve objectivity about the moral and the role of aesthetics in connection with morality. I also want to preserve objectivity about the good and prudential internalism. Now that I have situated these figures' views in the contemporary debate regarding moral motivation, I am going to sketch my own account. I shall begin with a point that Murdoch draws from Plato.

In connection with Plato's view that we all seek the Good, Murdoch presents her view of an 'Idea of Perfection.'<sup>177</sup> She insists that true perfection is never attainable by human beings, and, thus, that perfection is always an ideal. Paradoxically, the fact that perfection can never be attained increases its capacity to inspire us toward it. As I discussed in Chapter 3, her argument from perfection is one way in which she aims to ground the reality of the Good. In company with Plato and Murdoch I am going to insist that we all seek the real Good.

It is well-known that this claim raises various questions regarding the meaning of the real Good and what motivates us toward it, as well as the relationship between the moral and the good and the way in which one is able to understand the moral and the good.<sup>178</sup> My aim in what follows is to shed further light on the answers to these questions. In doing so, I hope to clarify exactly what is compelling about an account of moral motivation that draws on (as well as expands) the views of Plato, Kant, and Murdoch.

First, there is a difference between (a) conceptualizing something or grasping something as moral and (b) understanding that that thing is good (best for me). One may do (a) without

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<sup>177</sup> See Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," *The Sovereignty of Good*, (NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971)

<sup>178</sup> Gentzler addresses this in "Attractions of Delight and Goodness."



doing (b); it is possible to conceptualize, for example, that helping an elderly person across the street is moral without understanding that this has anything to do with one's own well-being. I mean to distinguish between two epistemic attitudes toward the moral: Mere (sincere) belief vs. true understanding. One may have a sincere belief that something is morally required without truly understanding that it is morally required. I suggest that in order to truly understand that something is morally required, a person must understand that the moral is also good; i.e., that which is morally valuable is also prudentially valuable. To truly understand that something is morally required is to judge it from an impersonal perspective. When one comes to realize that the impersonal perspective is also the true first-personal perspective, then one will realize that the moral is the truly prudential. The moral is the good because being moral makes a person her most authentic self. When one gains the perspective that allows her to see the good, she will see that the moral is good for her. Realizing that the moral is good for her gives her an internal motivation toward it. One might make sense of this via the claim that the good has an index to the self in a way that the moral does not. In order to clarify this, I need to draw on some concepts that I developed in earlier chapters.

In chapters 3 and 4, I discussed the notion of the self as well as selflessness and Murdochian unselfing. One will recall that Murdoch's view of selflessness (which involves being unselfed, as it were) involves learning to relate to and perceive others in a morally correct way, and being freed from one's ego. Unselfing involves a kind of benevolence. That is, a person who has been unselfed will have developed an attitude of seeing human beings as they are, and she will do so not only because she is no longer focused egotistically on herself, but also because she is inevitably striving for perfection, i.e., for goodness.

Like Murdoch, my view is that the moral person is free in the sense that she is no longer focused on selfish illusions. She truly sees reality, which is something a person can only perceive when she is no longer focusing solely on herself. Freeing ourselves from egotistic illusion allows us to see what is real and true, including the truth about correct moral behavior. We see the needs of other people as having a call on us, as it were.

Murdoch does not use the phrase ‘true self,’ yet she holds the view that defeating the self involves becoming free. However, a fruitful way of explaining her account would develop the notion of the ‘true self’ as the one that sees from a moral perspective. For Murdoch, the moral perspective is the one that is gained by practicing attention – it is a selfless perspective, focused on other people and their needs and individual particularities. I mean to take this notion a step further. I suggest that there are two stages of this perspective: (1) The moral perspective is the one from which a person has access to the realm of the moral (seeing other people’s needs and interests as just as relevant as one’s own). However, a person who takes this perspective has not yet related it to oneself/seen its true relevance to oneself. (2) The second stage involves coming to identify the moral perspective as one’s own prudential perspective – one’s true prudential perspective.<sup>179</sup> At this stage, a person sees the moral and also goes on to see the moral as good for her. Thus, I am adding a higher stage – the true prudential perspective – to the original Murdochian notion of the moral perspective. In my view, one’s true self will be the one that sees not just from the moral perspective, but from the true prudential perspective.

This notion of what it means to find one’s true self also comes up in Plato and Kant, and, as I have mentioned previously, this notion marks one point of connection between their

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<sup>179</sup> One might suggest that the egoistical perspective can be viewed as prudential, so I am calling this the true prudential perspective in order to reduce any ambiguity.

respective views of the relationship between aesthetic experience and morality. For Plato, one is able to become a better version of herself by climbing the ladder of the *Symposium*, or by having an experience such as that which is described in the *Phaedrus*. In this case, one becomes morally good by becoming a certain kind of agent. She likens herself to a God through a relationship with an educator, and is hence, more like the Forms themselves.

We might say that being selfless involves focusing on something beyond what Kant would call the phenomenal self. Like Kant, my view is that this kind of “looking beyond” involves a redirecting of one’s consciousness away from oneself and one’s material and personal concerns. I have argued that Plato also wants to show that it is beneficial to direct one’s focus away from her material concerns, and he articulates this in terms of the soul’s functioning harmoniously. My point here is that Plato, Kant, and Murdoch emphasize some kind of selflessness, and all of these views involve some version of the claim that becoming selfless is a dimension of becoming good.

Returning to the idea that the Good has an index to the self in a way that the moral does not, I suggest that seeing something as truly Good is seeing something as prudential insofar as it is understood from a selfless perspective. I realize that ‘prudential insofar as it is understood from a selfless perspective’ is seemingly paradoxical, but I am using this phrase to mean that something is in one’s interest insofar as it is for the sake of a higher self. To clarify this, we can distinguish the following four cases from one another: (1) Self-denial might mean that one restrains or denies seeking the gratification of present desires of the self because one sees that the difference between her happiness and others’ happiness is irrelevant. (2) Selfless thoughts or acts based on concern for others could involve cases in which one risks one’s own safety or interests in order to help someone in need. Thus, for example, a person might enter a burning building to

save someone trapped inside. (3) Disinterested judgments (we might even include ‘disinterested awareness’) are judgments about something or someone that are impartial, free of bias or self-interest; i.e., not uninterested or indifferent. Thus, for example, one might genuinely admire the skill or resourcefulness of an enemy or competitor. (4) The absence of self-awareness for a period of time might mean that one attends to something so closely, or is so "absorbed" by something, that explicit consciousness of the self and its desires/problems/needs is absent for a period of time. Thus, for example, one may be so fully caught up in beautiful music that a cough by someone sitting nearby is a shocking reminder that we are selves in the company of other selves at some specific place and time. Something like this can also happen when we are concentrating on some intricate task that requires our undivided attention, as Murdoch notes in her well-known passage about learning Russian.

Each of these seems to be a perfectly ordinary case of what we could mean by "unselfing." That is, when we say that there is something incoherent or paradoxical in talk about "losing oneself," perhaps the real point is that the word “unselfing” is only superficially misleading. Indeed, to seriously maintain that there is something incoherent about the notion of losing oneself is to deny the reality of 1-4, which seems unreasonable.

I also note that these four distinctions show how the experience of (4) might help us toward (1-3) as more reliably part of our everyday modes of consciousness. That is, in the same vein with Murdoch, we might say that having experiences that give rise to (4) help us develop ways of thinking and feeling that are necessary to the moral life. Always thinking about the self and its desires is not a necessary feature of the human condition, but something more like a deeply-ingrained, culturally-reinforced habit that can be progressively altered or undone by

cultivating other modes of awareness. (4) is something that can open us to the reality of otherness, as it were, remaking us into something more real and grand in the process.

Thus, 'selfless' need not literally mean that a person has lost herself or that there is nothing left of what she once referred to as 'I' or 'me'. Instead, being selfless can mean restraining one's present desires for mere appearances of goodness because they conflict with the true Good. Thus, it makes sense to say that there could be something like a 'selfless self,' that is, your selfless self is a 'you' who is a most authentically you who, to borrow some terminology from Murdoch, has the capacity to 'see' from a higher perspective.

Moreover, Plato's distinction between the lower and higher parts of the soul is, once again, relevant: the appetite and spirit seek things that may only appear to be good, that provide immediate gratification, while (reason) the higher part is actually able to calculate what is truly good. Restraining the desires of the lower part is not a denial of a person's self. Rather, it is a kind of resisting of the lower parts of oneself in order to promote what is in one's more vital interests; that is, to promote the true and higher good for that person.

We might say, then, that, for Plato, this "higher soul" is what I want to call the 'selfless self,' as it were, and these are its values. By the higher soul, I mean the harmoniously functioning soul that directs a person toward the Good. As I discussed in section C, it is the harmonious soul that gives a person the point of view from which she may see what is truly good vs. what merely appears to be good,<sup>180</sup> and the point from which morally required things can be perceived as good.

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<sup>180</sup> Again, one's desires for good (whether real or apparent) result from some kind of perception of that good.

Turning to Kant's view, the selfless self is the one that is most human – we might say, the part that is strengthened through *Achtung* – and it will value the moral law. From Murdoch's point of view the selfless self is the one into which the successful moral pilgrim transforms, who values the perspective that is given via the practice of attention – the clear vision of reality.

With these points in mind, I suggest that in order to see that the moral is good one must realize her selfless self; i.e., she must realize who she is. This will cause her to realize what is most valuable/most good, which is being moral. Thus, she must see the moral as good. However, it is possible to make judgments about goodness from a narrowly, self-focused perspective. This perspective involves a narrow conception of the self, and this conception of the self requires something different from that toward which the selfless self aims. Drawing on Plato's view, one way to explain this is that the self-focused self may require certain things, while the selfless self requires certain others; that which is actually good for the self-focused self, as it were, may call on a person to seek specific pleasures and the fulfillment of desires that are relevant to the self-focused perspective. (If we were to use Platonic language, we might call these the appetitive pleasures and desires.) However, focusing on those pleasures and the fulfillment of those desires will not be prudential for the selfless self, because the selfless self has, as it were, moved on to a broader perspective. Though the pleasures and the fulfillment of desires that are relevant to the self-focused perspective may indeed be good for the self-focused self, they are, in a truer sense, only distortedly good. I am arguing that there are distortedly good things that are relevant to the self-focused self, and that there are truly good things that are relevant to the selfless self. However, the possibility that the self-focused self may desire something is purely selfish and immoral, should not be excluded. This will occur when the self-focused self seeks what is good for it (but which is actually only distortedly good in a true

sense). The point is that the self-focused self requires something different from and inferior to that which the selfless self requires. I do not mean that the self-focused self is looking from a false perspective; rather it is looking from an inferior one. I am suggesting that there is a higher self that is called toward the real good. This higher self takes a moral and then prudential perspective (which I have shown is consistent with being selfless), and thus, it is to it that the true good is revealed.

To tie these remarks back to the account of moral motivation that I sketched at the beginning of this section, we can make the following claims: In the case in which we make a moral judgment, we see an action as right but we may not necessarily see it as something that is prudential insofar as it is understood from a selfless perspective. That is, I might not see the action as in my interest insofar as it promotes higher goodness – the kind of goodness that involves a shift of focus from the desires and wants of the self to, for instance, the interests of someone else. If a person does not see this, the person has merely gotten the moral judgment right, as it were, but she doesn't understand that the object/action in question is good (she does not see the true good). On the other hand, if a person makes a moral judgment and a judgment about goodness (if she not only gets the moral judgment right but also understands that the object in question is good), she will have made such a judgment from what I have called the true prudential perspective.

Ultimately, then, a person will see that this perspective is what is truly good for her. Once she adopts this perspective she will see that what is required as moral is good for her. Normally, we see what is morally required, but without the higher, prudential perspective, we do not see our own benefit in it. Thus, true claims about goodness are seen as being in one's own interest when they are understood from a higher perspective, and hence, acting in accordance with the

good is prudential. Knowing goodness entails identifying the true prudential perspective as one's own – i.e. realizing that what is truly good for oneself is to become selfless. The world, in a sense, calls us to respond to it: Our response must be that of acknowledging other people and the reality beyond our self-focused perspective. The higher perspective just is a response to the call of the world on us, and it is the perspective from which the Murdochian sort of reality is not only revealed, but revealed as good for us. Moral education allows a person to reach this perspective, which in turn allows one to see who she really is, and to apprehend true goodness. Once we have a true vision of the good, we see what is really good for us.

To quickly review, for Murdoch, the moral perspective is the one that is gained by practicing attention – it is a selfless perspective, focused on other people and their needs and individual particularities. I have taken this notion a step further and suggested that there are two stages of this perspective: (1) The moral perspective is the one from which a person has access to the realm of the moral (seeing other people's needs and interests as just as relevant as one's own), and (2) The second stage involves coming to identify the moral perspective as one's own prudential perspective – one's true prudential perspective. At this stage, a person sees the moral and also goes on to see the moral as good for her. I have argued that one's true self is the one that sees not just from the moral perspective, but from the true prudential perspective.

For Murdoch, when a person is trained to exercise attention (which is a function of aesthetic experience), she is trained to respect something other than herself. Aesthetic experiences, through the attitude that they command us to acquire, train us to respond and attend to things in the morally ideal way. I have argued that moral training, in Murdoch's view, may produce the successful moral pilgrim. This is the case because the practice of attention (that which aesthetic experiences may train us to do) is that which leads to the defeat of the ego, a



successful moral pilgrimage, and a moral transformation. That is to say that, since moral training brings about the transformation of a person that is the aim of the moral pilgrimage, moral training is the key to a successful moral pilgrimage, and aesthetic experience is the key to moral training.

## **VII. MOVING BEYOND MURDOCH**

In what follows, I offer some criticisms of Murdoch's position, and I suggest ways in which my view (which is an extended, and partially amended, version of her view) may eliminate those concerns. First, I mentioned above that Murdoch does not directly discuss any notion of a "true self" or "selfless self." Perhaps Murdoch is trying to avoid what I call the "prudential-as-understood-from-a-selfless-perspective paradox" in the next paragraph, by keeping away from such a discussion. However, because Murdoch argues that the moral person is a selfless person, but does not go on to discuss any kind of selfless self, one could argue that the self drops out of her view of a moral person (i.e. a successful moral pilgrim). This gives rise to an inconsistency, since what she is calling a successful moral pilgrim would no longer have a self. Or, on the other hand, if we concede that Murdoch's selfless self is the person who has reached the selfless perceptive, there is still a worry: The Murdochian moral pilgrim is left unhappy, and hence, not completely fulfilled. Murdoch does not want to identify one's happiness with selflessness. In fact, she insists that in reality there is no promise of happiness. I part with Murdoch here, and I suggest, on the other hand, that selflessness is fulfilling in a way that goes beyond being able to face 'unconsoling' reality.

My account brings in the notion of a selfless self. As I have previously noted, this move requires that I deal with the following apparent paradox: something being prudential insofar as it is understood from a selfless perspective can seem incoherent. In order to eliminate this problem, a successful account of the kind I am developing here must balance selflessness with happiness. In other words, it must be possible to identify one's happiness with selflessness to get rid of the prudential-from-a-selfless-perspective paradox. My account allows for a broadening of the self via what I am calling the selfless self, and it allows that one's true happiness is a response to the call of the world on that person. This view is still in the same vein with Murdoch's: It entails that selflessness (and a kind of ascent to a selfless vision) is what is called for. For Murdoch, this selflessness is devoid of self; however, in my account, selflessness involves the discovery of the true self. My view allows that morality be a way of looking that constitutes a self, which involves its true happiness (this is the prudential point of view). This point of view is focused on different things that are valued for others, yet one's own happiness can also be valued in this same way.

Second, I noted at the beginning of this section that the Murdochian idea of perfection is valuable. Furthermore, I noted in my explanation of the previous problem that the notion of a selfless self is necessary to eliminate the prudential-from-a-selfless-perspective paradox. However, the selfless self is particularly difficult to define. If we flesh out the idea of perfection as the idea of a perfect person – God – then we can more specifically define the selfless self as the self that is most God-like, and the selfless perspective as the ideal point of view; i.e., God's point of view. This is the loving point of view to which the morally required is revealed.

Murdoch would strongly resist this suggestion, given that in her version of the Ontological Argument she argues that what has been proved to exist should really be called

‘good’ instead of ‘God.’ However, in Chapter 3, I called this into question. Returning to one of those points of discussion, one will recall that the reason Murdoch wants the practice of attention to be done for nothing – and hence, argues that God cannot be a focus of attention – is that she argues that reality is not happy, and that the moral life is not consoling. In her view, the desire for such consolation and happiness is a product of illusion. In order to see reality via the practice of attention, the practice must be done without the promise of happiness in the picture at all. As I have explained, my account is able to allow for happiness in the moral life, which is seemingly more attractive.

In Chapter 3, I maintained that Murdoch might have been better off to avoid a discussion of Anselm’s Ontological Argument for the existence of God altogether, and that the argument from perfection better evidences the reality of the Good. Thus, I am suggesting that one might take this a step further by suggesting that the idea of perfection – which Murdoch’s argument from perfection supports – might be fleshed out as the idea of a perfect person. My claim is that this move has the potential to solve some of the problems that I have raised with respect to Murdoch’s view.

## **CODA**

### **I. A FINAL SUMMARY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND ITS CONNECTION WITH MORALITY IN PLATO, KANT, AND IRIS MURDOCH**

Plato, Kant, and Murdoch (each in different ways) share the thesis that aesthetic experience is connected with morality. However, this thesis is open to certain philosophical objections, such as the question as to whether aesthetic value itself can be morally improving

when there is morally corrupting art. In this coda, I shall review the way in which art functions in Plato's, Kant's and Murdoch's views. Then I shall sketch a view that suggests certain distinctions which help to clear up the relevant objections.

I have argued that beauty plays two roles in Plato's general theory of moral progress: (1) Some experiences of beauty via art can be used in moral training; that is, these experiences can be used to promote the kind of training that Plato suggests should take place during the beginning stages of education in the *Republic*. This is an affective kind of training, whereby a person learns to feel appropriately toward appropriate things. Experiences of beauty via art have the capacity to influence a person's character, and they can, in turn, help give rise to appropriate behavior. (2) An erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is a more profound sort of experience. This kind of experience can be distinguished from (1) in that it adds a higher kind of cognitive component which is lacking in (1). In (1), cognition is involved (cognition is involved in all affection), but only as perception-based thought, which merely has access to appearances. Some erotic experiences of beautiful people, on the other hand, provide an insight into the nature of true value and a certain kind of vision. They lead to the knowledge of true Beauty, and illuminate the value of the life lived by the lover of wisdom. Therefore, erotic experiences of beautiful people promote increased moral understanding as opposed to affective training.

As we have seen, for Kant, beauty is universal and objective, but it is defined by a process that takes place within the experiencing subject. In his view, beauty symbolizes the good, due to the analogy between the formal process that takes place among the cognitive faculties when a person makes a moral judgment and the formal process that takes place when a

person makes a judgment of beauty. This analogy makes possible the attunement to the moral that results from a Kantian experience of beauty.

Kant, like Plato, distinguishes between two kinds of aesthetic experience. He wants to show that an experience of *beauty* is especially capable of preparing us for loving something without interest (29:267). On the other hand, an experience of the *sublime* best captures what Kant calls ‘moral feeling,’ and hence, it is the sublime that teaches us to “esteem something even against our interest” (29L267). In Kant’s view, as a result of the different symbolic relationships that the beautiful and the sublime have with the moral, these kinds of experiences, each in a different way, are instructive; they not only affect our feelings, but they also promote understanding. The experience of beauty gives us a picture of morality, symbolizing the good via a disinterested liking. The pleasure that we take in the beauty in nature cultivates a certain kind of freedom from the merely personal inclinations on which we tend to focus. However, an experience of beauty does not go so far as to rein in the inclinations toward such pleasures. The sublime, on the other hand, is relevant to such a context. An experience of the *sublime* teaches us moral dignity. It makes us feel fear and pleasure together, and, above all, respect. This kind of experience gives a person a “flash” of the appropriate relationship between reason and the inclinations. Sublimity makes us aware of reason’s power, and it teaches us that, in our practical lives, that power should be given due respect, and that it should never be defeated by our inclinations.

Both Plato and Kant seem to suggest that in aesthetic experience one may find one’s true self. For Plato, one is able to become a better version of herself (she is able to grow morally) by climbing the ladder of the *Symposium*, or by having an experience such as that which is described in the *Phaedrus*. Here, as I have previously shown, one becomes morally good by

becoming a certain kind of agent. She likens herself to a God through a relationship with an educator, and is hence, more like the Forms themselves.

For Kant, aesthetic experiences put people in touch with freedom, which is only predicable of the noumenal self. In this way, aesthetic experiences are linkages to the noumenal realm and the noumenal self. Kant emphasizes the notion that aesthetic experience involves a redirecting of one's consciousness away from oneself and one's material and personal concerns.<sup>181</sup> Interestingly, we have seen that Plato also wants to show that aesthetic experience at least involves a directing away from one's material concerns.

Drawing Plato's and Kant's theories together, Murdoch argues for her own theory of moral progress, which involves a pilgrimage that we must make from the self-focused fantasy life into which we are born to the apprehension of reality, particularly in its moral dimensions. This pilgrimage is possible only via the practice of what she calls 'unselfing.' In Murdoch's view, certain kinds of aesthetic experiences train us to pay attention to things other than ourselves, and hence, they facilitate unselfing. I have suggested that we understand Murdoch's view in the following way: When we see art or nature and apprehend beauty, it commands our attention, and something slips away from us in the moment in which we are required to exercise attention. That something is, in fact, ourselves. Yet, it isn't as if everything disappears in that moment – something is surely left. That something is everything else – all that is not ourselves. We have never before seen this reality, yet we “gaze” upon it “with the passion of a lover.” In that moment, when we no longer figure in our self-focus, all that is not ourselves is “filled to the brim with being.” This is Murdochian love – to look and look until the self exists no more. In a sense, it is death – the death of the self by which the real world “becomes quite automatically the

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<sup>181</sup> As I discussed in earlier chapters, this is to say that one is focusing on something beyond the phenomenal self.

object of perfect love.”<sup>182</sup> It is in this way that an aesthetic experience gives us an example of the way in which we ought to act toward other objects, i.e., other individuals; that is, we ought to pay them *attention*. In this way, one might say that, for Murdoch, the aesthetic just is the realm in which our attention can be focused. Indeed, the notion of attention is the key to understanding Murdoch’s view regarding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and thus, in her view, aesthetic experiences are the key to moral progress.

For Murdoch, aesthetic experience shows us the difference between the self and the world. It does not console us, or encourage pride, or feed the illusions that we create of ourselves. This is analogous to the way in which we ought to behave toward other individuals: we ought to contemplate them in their individual particularities, and ought to look in order to truly see them, giving them our full attention.

Murdoch recognizes and discusses all of the following kinds of aesthetic experiences as experiences that promote moral transformation: beauty in nature and art, erotic experiences of beautiful people, and sublimity in art and nature. She maintains that moral training, the sort of reformation that results from Plato’s erotic experiences of beautiful people, and the triumph over the ego may all result from all or any of those kinds of experiences (beauty in art or nature, erotic experiences of beautiful people, or experiences of sublimity and tragedy). Some of these experiences might be more apt than others to teach us about certain aspects of moral reformation. For example, an erotic experience of beauty might be especially capable of teaching us love for other people, insofar as it teaches us to appreciate the subjectivity of another individual. Tragedy is perhaps especially capable of showing us the idea of death, which has a particularly powerful impact against the ego. I am not suggesting that, for Murdoch, sublimity cannot train us to love

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<sup>182</sup> Murdoch, *The Unicorn*, (NY: Penguin Books, 1963), pgs. 197-198

other people or that erotic experiences of beauty cannot aid in de-creating the ego. However, the point is that certain kinds of experiences of beauty are especially good at facilitating certain aspects of moral reformation. Nonetheless, for Murdoch, it is not out of the question that any one kind of aesthetic experience may by itself bring about moral training, moral growth, and the defeat of the ego. When a person is trained to exercise attention (which is a function of aesthetic experience), she is trained to respect something other than herself. Aesthetic experiences, through the attitude that they command us to acquire, train us to respond and attend to things in the morally ideal way. They teach us the morally ideal way of relating to the world. I have argued that moral training, in Murdoch's view, may produce the successful moral pilgrim. This is the case because the practice of attention (that which all of these aesthetic experiences may train us to do) is that which leads to the defeat of the ego, a successful moral pilgrimage, and a moral transformation. That is to say that, since moral training brings about the transformation of a person that is the aim of the moral pilgrimage, moral training is the key to a successful moral pilgrimage, and aesthetic experience is the key to moral training.

Plato, Kant, and Murdoch share the basic view that aesthetic experience may promote moral reformation. However, there are obvious problems that arise from the position that they share. In the next section I shall sketch these problems and present some possible responses.

## **II. OBJECTIONS TO THE VIEW THAT AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE MAY GIVE RISE TO MORAL PROGRESS**

One issue that arises concerning the connection between aesthetic experience and moral progress is the question as to how aesthetic value (beauty, sublimity) can be morally improving when there exists morally corrupting art. A work of art that is about something evil, or that



presents an evil or morally corrupting message, may lead its viewers to have a positive feeling about evil, or to even engage in evil activity. There are cases where a work of art may, in fact, have a detrimental effect on its viewers' behavior, or where a work of art offers a morally reprehensible message. For example, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* portrays black people as lust-driven drunkards, and as cruel. This film contributed to racism and racially motivated murders in the 1900s.<sup>183</sup> Additionally, a Nazi song is something that presents an immoral message, while the aesthetic features of the artwork may be valued as good or beautiful. Simone Weil was acknowledging such an aspect of things when she said, "I know that if at this moment I had before me a group of twenty young Germans singing Nazi songs in chorus, a part of my soul would instantly become Nazi."<sup>184</sup> Also, since modern music (such as rock and hip hop) often involves controversial lyrics, many people hold the view that, due to its attractive aesthetic qualities, this sort of music has the capacity to draw people toward taking the morally reprehensible actions that are mentioned in the lyrics.<sup>185</sup>

This issue raises the further question of just how close the tie really is between art and morality.<sup>186</sup> A debate in recent literature involves the more specific question as to whether aesthetic value is a different kind of value than moral value. Some philosophers suggest that the

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<sup>183</sup> Christopher Hamilton discusses this example in "Art and Moral Education," *Art and Morality*, pp. 46. Also, see Barry, Iris and Bowser, Eileen, *D. W. Griffith: American Film Master* (New York: Doubleday, 1965)

<sup>184</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, "Letter II, Same Subject," pg. 11

<sup>185</sup> See Kathleen Higgins, "The Music of Our Lives," *The Music of Our Lives*, pp. 150-154.

<sup>186</sup> I should note that many thinkers, in addition to the ones that I have focused on in this dissertation, have explored the tie between art and morality. To name some of them, Martha Nussbaum argues that art (novels, specifically) may direct our attention to other people in particular situations, and then prompt us to imaginatively enter into, as it were, the subjectivity of those individuals who are presented to us in the artwork. See Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). Additionally, Noel Carroll suggests that art deepens our understanding of our current knowledge. See Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Also, R.W. Beardsmore claims that arts expands and deepens our understanding of the way in which actions give rise to emotions and moral qualities, and so it helps us to become more sensitive as we perceive others. This, he argues, facilitates moral education. See Beardsmore, *Art and Morality* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

aesthetic and ethical evaluation of art sometimes “go their separate ways.”<sup>187</sup> One view is that art just does not have any effect on people’s morality, for good or ill. Additionally, some thinkers maintain that just because a work of art gives rise to ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is not aesthetically defective, and just because a work of art gives rise to ethically commendable attitudes, that does not make it aesthetically meritorious.<sup>188</sup> On the other hand, opponents of this sort of view argue that “wherever there is a moral flaw, the work is of lesser value as art and wherever it is morally virtuous the work’s value as art is enhanced.”<sup>189</sup>

The central issue in this debate is whether ethical import should be taken into account when deciding upon aesthetic value. However, the additional, related question that more directly gets at the heart of the matter that I have been discussing in this dissertation is whether aesthetic value – our delight in aesthetic forms – is itself, by its very nature, morally positive. In other words, if we consider cases such as *The Birth of A Nation*, a Nazi song, or even works such as Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine Du Monde*, which are all considered to be morally corrupting, yet aesthetically valuable art, is there a morally good aspect of these kinds of works? Is the beauty in these works good, as such, in itself? Can there still be an element of morally positive insight in

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<sup>187</sup> Marcia Muellder Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 138. Also, see Frank Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>188</sup> Peter Lamarque argues that the moral character of a work of art is strictly irrelevant to its value as art in “Tragedy and Moral Value,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73.2 (1995) pp. 239-249. Also see Matthew Kieran’s “Art, Morality, and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value,” *Philosophy Compass* (2006), pp. 129-143, and Anderson, James C. and Jeffrey T. Dean, “Moderate Autonomism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.2 (1998), pp. 150-166.

<sup>189</sup> Put another way, “The ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious.” See Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art,” *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essay at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1998. Also see Ron Bontekoe and Jamie Crooks’ “The inter-relationship of moral and aesthetic excellence,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, 1992, pp. 210. They argue that “The expression of a bad moral vision does indeed constitute an aesthetic defect in a work of art, and...it is always necessary to judge a film, a novel, a painting or a poem to be flawed as an art work because of its mishandling of moral themes.”

morally corrupting art? Thus, in what follows, my aim is to make relevant distinctions that will help clear up this difficulty.

### **III. A DEFENSE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND THE GOOD**

Most of us can think of a work of art that we have found morally troubling. While, in some cases, we find works of art to be artistically inspired and morally virtuous, in other cases, we find works of art to be artistically inspired but morally problematic. In these latter cases, the art is aesthetically valuable; e.g., its form, the medium used, color, rhythm, and harmony are all qualities that are enjoyable to experience (they appeal to us). Additionally, the imagery may be coherent, the style may be vivid, and the themes may be complex. However, the art presents an immoral message (e.g., Nazism, racism, sexism, misogyny). What are we to say about these cases in art? As I explained above, the main issue that I want to focus on in this section involves the question as to whether aesthetic value – our delight in forms – is morally positive by itself, by its very nature. In other words, I want to focus on the question as to whether there can be an element of morally positive insight in aesthetically valuable, but morally corrupting, art. In what follows, I shall sketch a view that aims to address this issue.

I shall begin by making some distinctions: First, there are certain things about a work of art that are aesthetically appealing (e.g., vivid style, complex themes, color, rhythm, harmony, and form). When I look, for instance, at Leonardo Da Vinci's "The Last Supper," I apprehend the qualities of the painting. I detect something about the form. I notice that the figures are arranged in a certain way, and that the lines and colors fit together in a kind of harmony that allows for the presentation of beauty. When I experience the painting, I apprehend its formal

qualities. These qualities should be distinguished from the qualities of the experience that I am having when I perceive the object. Those qualities, on the other hand, are present in me as an experiencing subject, not in the object of beauty. Second, most art represents something – e.g., an event, or a state of affairs – that can be described non-morally. For example, in Picasso’s “Guernica,” the content is the bombing of a village in Spain, and that which resulted, and the content of Michelangelo’s “Pieta” is Mary holding the crucified Christ. Third, some art presents a message – a moral judgment on that which it represents. Returning to the Guernica example, the message in that case is that bombing Guernica was wrong. For another example, some music lyrics present messages that rape and violence are morally permissible, some paintings present messages that women are inferior to men or vice versa. On the other hand, some art works present messages that virtues like courage and integrity are virtues that a person ought to possess. With these distinctions in mind, I am going to argue that there is a relation between aesthetic qualities and the messages – the moral judgments on that which art represents – and that those judgments can be false.

If we think about any example of an aesthetic experience, we can see that aesthetic qualities recommend a moral judgment. This is because all general aesthetic experience, on the level of its formal, attractive, qualities, involves a presentation of something as if it were good. That is to say, aesthetic experience, on the level of its formal qualities, presents something that appears to be good, via attractiveness, and thus it evokes a certain response – a pro-attitude – in the experiencing subject.

As I noted above, some aesthetic objects present messages via content. Let us suppose that, in the case of those objects, there is a two-dimensional message, as it were: On one level, we have the initial message presented by the formal qualities of the work – the presentation of an

alleged good. On another level, there is the message presented in the content of the work (e.g., ‘violence is beneficial,’ ‘courage is a virtue,’ etc.). These content-level messages can be true or false. If we have a case where the (content-level) message in a work of art is false, some truth will still be presented in abstraction in the initial, formal-level message that is presented by the aesthetic qualities.

I mean to suggest that there will be a morally positive element – some morally good aspect – of aesthetic experience, in its formal-level message. That is, the beauty in the formal qualities of the work is in itself morally improving because beauty itself is intrinsically connected to moral value. If the content-level message is false, the beauty in the formal qualities is being perverted to promote the false message; that which is exploited in art with immoral content, is the attractive formal qualities, and these can be used in art to draw a person to a moral message or an immoral one.

With an eye to Plato, Kant, and Murdoch, I am suggesting that though there are two sorts of qualities – the aesthetic and the moral – and that the aesthetic is, in its nature, appropriate to the moral. I mentioned above that there is a certain relation between what I have called the messages of the works and the presentation of the works (the formal attractive qualities): The latter draw us to have a pro-attitude toward the former, even though the former may be false, and hence, give rise to a false moral judgment.

It will be helpful to apply this theory to an example that I mentioned earlier, *The Birth of A Nation*: this film’s attractive aesthetic qualities involve the complexity of the story, the talented film-making, the style of the presentation, and perhaps the choice of background sound and scenery. Its content is the description of issues regarding black Americans during its time. One

dimension of its message, however, is negative towards black Americans – they are portrayed in the film as drunkards and so on. What we have, then, in accordance with the distinctions that I have made, is a work of art that is attractive in its formal presentation; it presents an aspect of goodness – the goodness that is part of beauty of the formal qualities, as such – on the level of its formal-message. However it conveys the false content-level message that black Americans are bad people. Furthermore, the people who were persuaded to kill black Americans after watching the film were people who took the presentation of goodness in the aesthetic qualities of the film and transferred it to the moral assessment of its message. That is, they were mistakenly persuaded to judge the message that black people are bad people as something true, in light of their attraction to the formal qualities of the film. I am suggesting that the reason this piece of art gave rise to immoral behavior is that its content-level message is false, and its formal qualities (and the element of positive moral insight that is intrinsically a part of beauty as such) in itself, were used to attract its viewers toward that false message. Thus, the moral judgment made by those who behaved immorally was also false. When art gives rise to immoral behavior, it is because it presents, in some sense, a false message, and the viewer mistakes that message to be true in light of the element of goodness that is presented by the aesthetic qualities of the object.

Let us consider a different kind of example, which I referenced in an earlier chapter: Michelangelo's *David*. In this case, the formal qualities involve, for example, the curves and shapes in the sculpture, the lines and perhaps even subtle shades of white and grey, the position of the figure, and the precision with which his features were created. The formal qualities of the work present a message of goodness in their beauty, as such. The content-level message presented in this work is one of fortitude and triumph. The moral judgment that follows from this message is that one ought to possess fortitude, and perhaps even, as Kant might argue, that

triumph over one's natural inclinations is possible. The message presented here is not a false one. In this case, that which is presented as good in the art's formal qualities and that which is presented as good in the art's message have the ideal relationship for promoting moral transformation. However, I am also arguing that in cases where the aesthetic qualities of a work are used to incite a false moral message, those qualities, themselves, present at least an element of positive moral insight.

I realize that there are cases in which a person may view an aesthetic object that presents a true moral message, such as the *David*, and either will not be morally affected or will even proceed to do immoral things. In connection with this, one may recall Plato's point that there are people who will not make the ascent of the *Symposium* – they will remain stuck on the sensuous qualities of the beautiful person at the bottom, or there will be people who are unable to control their “black horses,” to speak in the terms that Plato uses in the *Phaedrus*. Murdoch also suggests that there will be people who remain at the stage before the moral pilgrimage, self-focused and absorbed in their egos. In her view, not everyone will make the pilgrimage, and not everyone who embarks on it will succeed. Certain people may experience beauty in art or nature, or sublimity, and although they are presented with a glimpse of positive moral insight, they may never be transformed into better people. What follows, then, is that some aesthetic objects, when experienced by some people, will give rise to moral transformation. The objects such as the *David* may give rise to moral progress because they present true messages and they involve a presentation of beauty, which is intrinsically connected with goodness. Objects such as the Nazi songs present false messages, and may be used to incite immorality if, in light of the beauty in the formal qualities of such art, a person mistakenly interprets the false messages as true. However, if a person does not mistake the false message as true, she may be affected in a

morally positive way by it; the work still presents a moral insight on the level of its formal qualities, since the beauty therein is intrinsically connected with goodness.



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